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After Haiti earthquake, spike in adoption requests benefits other countries in need

By Judy Peet

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Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger Hope Atkinson and Mark Hochenberger say grace before dinner at their home in Long Valley with their 2-year-old daughter, Meseret, who they adopted from Ethiopia.

The post-earthquake images were wrenching: helpless Haitian infants, some injured, many hungry, lying on blankets on bare dirt.

They were babies in need, and Americans responded as they always do, by rushing to adopt. The impulse was real, but the timing was wrong.

Adoption agencies in New Jersey and the rest of the country received thousands of calls after the Jan. 12 earthquake from people interested in bringing a Haitian child to the United States. But agency officials knew it might be months or even years before those children could be adopted.

So the officials suggested that prospective parents consider another country filled with orphans needing a home. In most cases, that country was Ethiopia.

If just a fraction of those adoption-minded Americans switch their focus from Haiti to Ethiopia, adoption experts said, that East African country will climb to the top of the list of nations whose orphans are placed in American homes.

Ethiopia's sudden popularity lies in part with regulations that are less strict than countries such as China and Russia, and with the wait to receive an Ethiopian child significantly shorter.

While the adoption calls have tailed off in recent weeks, adoption experts say the increased demand for children raises questions about whether Ethiopia can handle the requests.

There are also concerns that potential parents may adopt for the wrong reasons.

"When our calls nationally about Haitian adoption went from 300 a month to 300 a day, we immediately thought of Ethiopia, but we want to make sure the motivation is family-building, not a response to tragedy," said Nancy Dykstra-Powers, director of Bethany Christian Services adoption agency in Fair Lawn. "We are here to help the children, not the parents."

There is no question of need. Decades of drought, poverty and disease in Ethiopia have left an estimated 5 million children without one or both parents, according to aid organizations. There are no exact figures of the children in orphanages, but the number is estimated in the thousands.

In 1997, only 82 children were adopted from Ethiopia by U.S. parents. In 2005 actress Angelina Jolie joined the crowd, and the number of adoptees from Ethiopia jumped to 731. Since then, the annual number of adopted Ethiopian children has tripled, while adoptions in other countries have declined, according to federal statistics.

With 2,277 adoptions in 2009, Ethiopia surpassed Russia and Guatemala, and this year it may top China, adoption experts said.

Rapid growth coincides, however, with claims of abusing Ethiopia's adoption system. Just three weeks ago, the U.S. State Department announced it will investigate all Ethiopian adoption applications due to "reports alleging direct recruitment of children from birth parents," a practice known as child harvesting.

Some adoption groups believe the problem is more of shoddy paperwork — a concern that led Guatemala to suspend its own intercountry adoption program last year — than of harvesting. Regardless, the investigation will delay the process "by weeks or even months," according to a State Department bulletin.

A spokeswoman for the National Association of Black Social Workers said her organization's concern is not with the adoption process but with the result. "We question the ability" of white, middle-class adoptive parents to "adequately prepare African-American children for the discrimination they will face in this society," said Toni Oliver, chairwoman of the group's Family Preservation Task Force.

"We have a real problem with saying you are helping a country by taking its children," said Oliver. "It's not enough to say love is all that matters."

"But love is all that matters," said Hope Atkinson, 43, of Long Valley, who with her husband adopted their 2-year-old daughter, Meseret, from Ethiopia last year.

"I admit I'm not great at fixing her hair," Atkinson said, gently rubbing the gold-tipped ringlets covering Meseret's head. "And this area is not exactly full of people of color. But we can love her and teach her to be proud and confident."

"And maybe Meseret will be part of a new generation where race is not so important."

SHIFTING PATTERN

In the early 1970s, when domestic adoption peaked at about 175,000 a year, civil rights groups protested placing black children with white families. The debate prompted a shift to international adoption. The children were from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

The one thing they had in common was they "were not black," said historian Ellen Herman, author of the Adoption History Project at the University of Oregon. "Black children and white parents have always defined the debate about transracial adoptions."

In 2001, an estimated half million American families were interracial through adoption, according to a study released this past November by the Evan. B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York City. The annual number of international adoptions — the majority interracial — peaked in 2005 at nearly 23,000.

In 2009, however, overall international adoption dropped below 13,000, and several countries have closed their doors. The focus in many remaining open countries is now on older and special-needs children, authorities said.

Ethiopia, in contrast, has a large population of young children who are orphaned or have been given up by their parents because of poverty or AIDS. The wait to adopt there is about 12-18 months, less than half the time it takes to adopt from China, statistics show.

"When we were flooded with calls from families wanting to adopt from Haiti, we knew they were people who were willing to accept racial differences," said Murial Elfman, New Jersey director for Holt International, one of the country's oldest international adoption agencies. "The children in Ethiopia are just as needy, but they're not on television, because starvation isn't as dramatic as earthquake."

"We know that interracial adoption isn't for the faint of heart, but we've learned a lot over the years about transition," Elfman added. "We have parenting classes, social workers, cultural camps and sensitivity training. We encourage parents to move to interracial communities."

Some studies have suggested that siblings of the same race as newly adopted children can help them overcome racial barriers. That was part of the rationale behind the four adoptions by Aimee and Nicholas Vanduyne of Brick.

"Our first child, who's now 14, was adopted after we fostered her from the state when she was a toddler," Aimee Vanduyne said. "Then we adopted Sammy, who is now 6, privately. Then we got John, now 7, from Haiti. While we were in Haiti, we met and fell in love with Evina, who is 15 and arrived last month."

"Some days I struggle with the decision. I can't give them the black experience, but they can give it to each other," she added. "Sure, discrimination is a real thing, but I don't know how to fix the world. I just know how to love my kids."

MONEY CONCERNS

Atkinson 43, and her husband, Mark Hochenberger, 55, said they hope to adopt another Ethiopian child. But Hochenberger, a contractor, has lost so much work with the recession, "we're just not sure we can afford it right now."

The adoption process in Ethiopia is less expensive than in many other countries but still can exceed \$20,000, including travel costs.

New Jersey officials urged prospective parents of all races to consider adopting children through the state's Department of Children and Families, a low- or no-cost option. While most of the children featured on the state website are older or have special needs, there are available children of every age and situation, said spokeswoman Lauren Kidd.

Ideally, Kidd said, the department would prefer to place children in same-race households, but ultimately "the best choice is a loving, safe environment."

Back in Long Valley, Meseret, a sunny, confident toddler, shared her blueberries as her parents discussed their journey into interracial adoption.

"With our ages, we weren't on the 'sought after' list for domestic adoption." said Atkinson. "We worried about our motives, and our families, and whether or not we were being naive. Then we decided to follow our hearts."

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