Ethiopia : Adopting Ethiopia's Aids orphans

Le complexe problème de l'adoption des orphelins du sida par des personnes vivant dans le Nord...

- Orphelins du sida, orphelins et enfants vulnérables (OEV) -

By Mike Wooldridge - BBC News, Belgium - 4/03/2005

Two Ethiopian girls, both three years old and cousins, play happily in a garden in Belgium with their new family.

It is a raw day and there is a layer of snow on the ground - something they have never seen in their lives before.

But there are squeals of delight as Hani and Medhanit are pushed down a slide by the brother they have just acquired, 10-year-old Marvin, and their new sister, five-year-old Alina.

Looking on are Stefan and Miriam Collet, who have joined the growing number of couples in Europe and North America to adopt children from Ethiopia.

It is helping Ethiopia as the cost of caring for its estimated five million orphaned and adopted children soars. It also reflects the fact that more and more couples in the West want to adopt.

The Collets, who live near the eastern Belgian town of Eupen, had always wanted a larger family.

AIDS orphans

Marvin is their natural son. Alina is from Haiti and was adopted four years ago. They had thought they would look for another Haitian child to adopt but the troubled situation in Haiti has made that more difficult.

Their local adoption agency suggested Hani and Medhanit, not wanting to put the two girls with different families. The Collets readily agreed.

One of the girls' mothers has died after contracting HIV and the other mother is also HIV-positive and has become ill.

The Collets had already adopted a Haitian child There is a steady increase in the number of Ethiopian children becoming orphans because of Aids. In the past it was mostly famine, conflict and other diseases that claimed the lives of parents.

Then there are children abandoned by mothers who fear their poverty means they can look after them no longer.

The terrible famine of the mid-1980s left many children orphaned. Some went overseas for adoption then but many have been cared for and brought up in orphanages of various kinds.

Today there are many agencies in Addis Ababa handling adoptions.

They are licensed by the Ethiopian authorities, who say Ethiopian orphans have a right to be adopted, but sending them abroad is a last resort because it is preferable for children to be brought up in their own culture.

Before they flew to Belgium, I saw Hani and Medhanit in a home in Addis Ababa that acts as a halfway house.

Foreign adoptions

They were among around 30 children who were waiting to be chosen by couples overseas - in this home all of them under three years old.

I was told children will usually spend three to six months there. Some will have come from orphanages. Others - like Hani and Medhanit - directly from families hit by HIV/Aids. Children will not be sent overseas if they are found to be HIV-positive themselves.

Some question remains on whether more could be done to encourage Ethiopian families to adopt the orphans. At present adoption is not widely practised in Ethiopian society. The government says it plans to do more to promote it.

One of the problems is placing older children with families in the West. But the Aids crisis is leaving children of all ages without one or both parents and with grandmothers, if they are still alive, often unable to bear the burden of looking after the children.

The number of children who already try to fend for themselves on the streets of Addis Ababa is testimony to the challenges before the Ethiopian authorities.

But Hani and Medhanit, at least, have now began a new life more than 3,000 miles from their homeland. Is it right for them ? The Collets say they will know that from the two girls themselves when they are grown up.