

# Press Releases: Suzanne Lawrence, Special Advisor for Children's Issues On the Release of the Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption

Special Briefing

Suzanne Lawrence, Special Advisor for Children's Issues

Via Teleconference

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**MR GREENAN:** Thank you. Thank you, everyone, for joining us this morning for this on-the-record conference call with Suzanne Lawrence, who's the Special Advisor for Children's Issues here at the Department of State. And she'll be talking this morning about the release of the Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption. Suzanne will make some opening remarks and then take your questions. Both the report and the call are embargoed until the conclusion of the call.

So thank you again for joining us, and I'm happy to turn it over now to Suzanne Lawrence.

**MS LAWRENCE:** Thank you, Robert. And good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us for this call. It's a real pleasure to be with you this morning so that I can present the Fiscal Year 2017 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption. The report will actually also be publicly available on our website later this afternoon; I'm sure a number of you are familiar with [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov).

You may be wondering a little bit about the report and the history of the report. It's a report that we do submit annually, as required by the Congress, through the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000. And what we do in the report is we outline our continued efforts to establish or maintain intercountry adoption as a viable option for children who are in need all over the world.

I know Robert gave you my name and my title, but I thought it would be helpful to know a little bit more about me. I've worked for the Department of State for 28 years as a Foreign Service officer and came into this role as the Special Advisor for Children's Issues for the Department of State in September of 2017. I work in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and again, many of you are probably familiar with the bureau and its work. Maybe you don't know that one of its most important roles is its responsibility for

intercountry adoptions.

As a special advisor, I spend a lot of time on the road, and I'm traveling constantly. And as part of that travel, I am meeting with and working with foreign governments directly on this issue. We share best practices, we talk about how we can work better together as partner countries, and I listen to their concerns, bring them back to the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and hopefully we are able then to respond to their concerns.

In addition to the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000, the United States became a party to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption in 2008. And those are two pieces of legislation that guide us each and every day – that, and the really important goal of ensuring that every child deserves the security and love of a permanent family. It's – that in itself is inspiring, but we are also inspired by the adoptions that we help complete every day. And that inspiration further fuels our dedication as we work with the foreign countries, with the adoption service providers, with families, and with the broader adoption community.

We know that we owe it to all of those people, to – especially to the adoptive families and to the children who are being adopted, as well as the birth parents – that intercountry adoptions are ethical and transparent. And what that means, really, in a practical sense, is that we're out there each and every day, here in Washington and around the world through our embassies and consulates, advocating for children and putting in place safeguards so that we can protect against any abuses of the intercountry adoption system.

I know you've received a copy of the report, and maybe you've had some time to look at it. I thought it would be helpful to provide a little bit of context and also to focus on three areas that I thought would be of most interest.

So let's start with the numbers. You've seen that the report has a lot of numbers in it. The overall number of adoptions to the United States in Fiscal Year 2017 was 4,714. And that does represent a decline of 658 from the previous year. And again, to provide some context for this year's numbers, I think the most important thing to note is that this is a decrease in intercountry adoptions, which is a global trend over the last decade. Other receiving countries report similar reductions in the number of children adopted internationally.

I think another thing that is hopeful – or helpful in looking at the numbers is that even with those lower overall numbers due to the global decline, U.S. families consistently provide homes to 50 percent of the adopted children who are placed internationally. I think that speaks a lot to Americans and the families that are continuing to open their hearts and their homes to children in special situations. The United States actually receives the most special needs children, the most sibling groups, and the most children over age nine, and that's worldwide.

The other thing I would say about the numbers is that when you look at that decline in 2017, it was primarily driven by internal changes in just two

countries. The first is China, and the reason for that is something that I'm sure many of you are aware of, that there has been a growing, a rising middle class in China. And so we've seen an increase in domestic adoptions, and so that would explain China's role in that decline. And the other country that represents the primary drive behind the reduction in last year's report is that – that in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and that's really an internal decision that was made there where the country actually no longer issues exit permits to adopted Congolese children who are seeking to depart the country with their adoptive parents. So I hope that's been helpful in understanding all those numbers and drawing out what we think are some of the more significant facts.

The other thing that I would point out are the barriers. What are the barriers to intercountry adoption? And when we look at what those barriers are, we find the most common one is that, unfortunately, we do continue to hear from families who are harmed by illicit and illegal practices in intercountry adoption. Sadly, even one case of corruption or fraud reduces confidence in the system. And you know these are families that just want to give a child a loving home, but unfortunately, they would lose that chance because of corrupt or unethical practices.

We work together with these families to identify and address the vulnerabilities, and then in the work that we carry out every day, we look to provide appropriate monitoring and oversight of adoption service providers, and that's really to protect these families' children, both birth and adoptive, and again, to preserve the future of intercountry adoption.

The last thing that I wanted to draw out from the report is really what can we do? What does the Department do? What is our response to these barriers? Because I think this is an area where the Department of State can and does make a difference. We take very seriously our legal mandate to ensure appropriate monitoring and oversight of these adoption agencies and service providers so that we can preserve the future of intercountry adoption. And we work very closely with Congress to ensure that we fulfill our obligations under the law.

We work – as I said, I travel all over, but we have many people in the Bureau of Consular Affairs who travel regularly. We have our ambassadors and our missions overseas, and we work through diplomatic engagement to advocate for intercountry adoption. We also collaborate with the adoption community and we are all looking for ways that we can serve the best interests of children as we work to overcome these concerns that are raised by the sending countries so that we can ultimately improve confidence in the U.S. accreditation system.

So before we move to questions – and I'm hoping that you'll have some good questions that will allow us to talk a little bit more about this topic – again, I just wanted to emphasize that this is one of the most important roles in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and we really are guided by the thought that every child does deserve the security and love of a permanent home.

I hope in the explanation of the numbers that you can see that even in the face of a global decline in intercountry adoptions, U.S. families consistently provide homes to 50 percent of the children who are adopted internationally, and that harm to even one adopted child is unacceptable and it does undermine confidence in the U.S. system.

So with that, I would be happy to take your questions.

**MR GREENAN:** All right. Thank you very much, Suzanne. We'll now go to our first question.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, once again, if you'd like to ask a question on the phone lines, you may press \* then 1 on your touchtone phone.

For our first question we'll go to the line of Rich Edson with Fox News. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hey, good morning, Suzanne and Robert. Just a question on the global trend that you'd mentioned and the fact that there was a reduction in U.S. adoptions this year. Would you say that the trend is largely credited to demand? Are there – I know you talked about some other factors that are country-specific, but the overall trend, would you say it's mostly credited to demand? And on top of that, would you say that the administration has – with the incoming Trump – or now incoming and serving for the past year Trump administration – how has that administration changed policy towards adoption in the U.S.?

**MS LAWRENCE:** Thanks for your question. There are many, many people who write on intercountry adoption and there are many views on really what is, I would say, the changing landscape of intercountry adoption. I think it reflects a lot of trends that have been discussed in previous annual reports, and some of the things that we've written in this year's report. I think what we see is that there have been many positive changes for children as some countries really begin to reduce some of the stigma associated with unwed mothers or they promote domestic adoption, or they themselves strengthen measures to prevent illicit practices.

As I discussed with China, you have a number of countries that have a growing middle class and there's a demand within those countries who were traditionally sending countries; there's a domestic demand in those countries for adopted – for adopting children. So I think that that is the changing landscape. And there's also a changing demographic of children that are eligible for intercountry adoption, and I touched a little bit on that when I talked about the special needs, the sibling groups, the older children. I think that what we see is something that mirrors what's happening here in the United States in foster care, that most children are older or they are part of a sibling group, and the vast majority of them may have some kind of special need.

All that being said, again, our focus really is on maintaining and preserving intercountry adoptions because even though the demographics are changing, even though the landscape is changing, we know that there are a lot of

children who live without family care, and ultimately, they would benefit from placement and permanency, we hope, with a loving U.S. family, but ultimately with a family. So that's why I spoke about our efforts to focus on maintaining and strengthening the capacity and policy framework in the countries of origin so that we can include intercountry adoption as a viable option when there are children in need.

And I think if you look back, just in response to sort of policy, again, those seminal sort of documents are that the U.S. Government is a party to the Hague Convention, which is an international convention, and many, many countries have seen that as the most reliable tool for the kind of ethical and transparent adoption that we all want, and that's since 2008 that we actually acceded to the convention or became party to the convention, and then, as I say, the congressional act was from 2000. There's also another piece of legislation that regards the accrediting of adoption service providers and that's from, I think, 2012.

So these things are really all from previous years and are mostly in response to being part of an international community that's looking really to safeguard intercountry adoption for all the parties that are involved.

**MR GREENAN:** Okay. Thank you very much. We'll move on to the next question.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you, and once again, if you would like to ask a question, please press \* then 1 at this time. Our next question will come from the line of Kylie Sertic with Kyodo News. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Hello, can you hear me?

**MR GREENAN:** Yes, we can hear you.

**QUESTION:** All right, great. So my question is: Do you at all monitor numbers of outgoing U.S. children who are adopted abroad? There's been trends in past years of, like, black children especially being adopted out of the U.S. internationally.

And then second question: Do you have any sort of outreach with adopted children, especially as they grow into adulthood and, like, do you take their concerns or commentary into account as you monitor these programs?

**MS LAWRENCE:** Thank you, Kylie. The report does give some information about children who are adopted from the United States, so you may have seen that statistic in Fiscal Year 2017. It's a small number, 83 children, that were adopted from the United States and they went to seven different countries – the vast majority to Canada, the next group to the Netherlands, and then the third ranking there would be Ireland.

Again, I would go back to those – that changing landscape that we talked about in the previous question. There has been a huge push in the United States to increase foster care, and we know that in many instances, foster care does lead to adoption. And I don't have the statistics and the State Department is not the responsible party for domestic adoptions, but there has been an increase in domestic adoption here in the United States. So I think

that really is what we know about the number of children that are adopted from the United States to countries overseas, and again, we don't handle domestic adoption, but it has increased as far as I am aware.

In terms of taking into account the concerns of adult adoptees, we do some stakeholder calls, and we do those on a regular basis. In fact, we just did one – I feel like it was this month – but I've been on the road a lot so I'm losing track of time. We had over 300 people call in to our stakeholder call and we cover a full range of topics. And I've been involved with two of the stakeholder calls since I assumed this role, and in both calls, there have been a number of people who represent adult adoptee groups, or just individually, they call in to raise their cases. When we do the stakeholder calls, we include USCIS, Citizenship and Immigration Services, because of course, many of the adult adoptees raise concerns that are related to their citizenship status, and that is the responsibility of USCIS.

So we are aware that there are a number of concerns. Indeed, I've actually met with some of these groups when I was in Korea at the end of 2017. And so yes, we are familiar with a lot of the issues that they like to bring to our attention and share their concerns with us. Thank you.

**MR GREENAN:** All right, thank you very much. We'll go on to the next question now.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Next question will come from the line of David Crary with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Suzanne, for taking this call. I – if I can sneak in two questions here, that would be grateful. With China, you correctly mentioned the increase in domestic adoptions as a major factor in the dropping numbers of intercountry adoptions. But in the written report, it has some more technical reason to do with nongovernmental organizations and new regulations in China. I guess my question is if you look at the overall drop from China, I mean, which is the bigger factor? Is it the domestic adoptions or this technical change or a mix?

And then my other questions is: You know a lot of U.S. adoption agencies are upset by the recent change in the accrediting agencies – the end of the relationship with COA and the formation of this new organization. Without delving into all the details, do you folks at State Department feel that this – concerns and frustration are well founded or are they perhaps based on misunderstanding and exaggerated? I'd just like to get your sense of what you folks at DOS make of the unhappiness in the adoption community.

**MS LAWRENCE:** Thank you, David. I'll go to the China question first, and then we can move over to the accrediting entities and some of the concerns in the adoption community. So as I've said, the changes in the middle class and the ability to have increases in domestic adoptions is something that I think has been happening over time. So I wouldn't be able to really say whether or not that had more to do with the decline as opposed to the domestic laws that were related to the governance of nongovernmental organizations, which I think is what you were referring to in the report, which is actually

something that happened in the last year.

And just to explain a little bit more – maybe you know already, but for those who might – that the laws themselves, which were, again, related to NGOs in China, were not targeted specifically at adoption, but they have indeed had a detrimental impact on the partnerships that have existed for a long time between U.S. adoption service providers and specific provinces that were designed to improve opportunities for children with special needs. So I think that – and in fact, 98 percent of the intercountry adoptions from China involved children with special needs. So we've met with Chinese counterparts.

We – I think they were here in January, so we had a day-long or two days of meetings with them. Again, our embassy in Beijing, our consulate in Guangzhou, many of our colleagues are constantly meeting with and sharing information with the Chinese counterparts who work on intercountry adoption. And we will continue to explain how this law has affected adoption service providers, but again, the law itself was not targeted specifically at intercountry adoption. And so that's that piece.

And I know you mentioned the accrediting entity, so what I would say is that what we do, as I mentioned in my opening statement, is we want to ensure that the practice of intercountry adoption is ethical and sustainable. And so these are really the cornerstones of what we're working towards. So our efforts – because legally we have the obligation to provide oversight for the accrediting entity that works with adoption service providers to monitor their activities. All of that is part of a long-term plan to ensure the viability of intercountry adoptions, again by ensuring the system is ethical and transparent. That benefits adoption service providers, it benefits the adoption community, it benefits children and families here in the United States and internationally.

As I mentioned earlier, the ability to work with foreign governments who are sending countries is determined by their confidence in what we do. And that's why we need to build that confidence through our monitoring and oversight. If we don't do that, they can consider suspending placement of children with U.S. families or even closing intercountry adoptions altogether. Because there was a number – there were concerns about the move to a new accrediting entity, we have had numerous calls with stakeholders, with adoption service providers, with adoption advocacy groups, with members of Congress, with their staffers. So we have done a lot of information. They have had the opportunity to talk to the leadership of the new accrediting entity. And you might be interested in a message from our assistant secretary that went onto our website where he actually goes into some great detail about the designation of the accrediting entity and what they do, which is supervision of the adoption service providers. But there is a fairly lengthy letter there from him that I think would go to some of the concerns that you have pointed out.

And again, I think overseeing intercountry adoptions is one of our most important roles. We must get that right. Every child deserves the security and love of a permanent home, and we have to accept that harm to even one adopted child is simply unacceptable and it will undermine confidence in the

U.S. system.

**MR GREENAN:** Thank you very much. We'll go on to the next question.

**OPERATOR:** Once again, if you'd like to ask a question, you may press \* then 1 at this time. Our next question will come from the line of Lesley Wroughton with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Yeah. Good morning. Sorry, I missed the top, so if you've already addressed this, my apologies. Can you just explain – seen the first intercountry adoptions in a year or more from nine countries, including Yemen, Zimbabwe, and Laos. Is that because of the conflict in Yemen?

**MS LAWRENCE:** I really couldn't say if that was due to the conflict in Yemen.

**MR GREENAN:** Thank you. Go on to the next question, please.

**OPERATOR:** Thank you. Our next question will come from the line of Dmitry Kirsanov with TASS. Please, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Good morning and thank you for doing the call. I'm looking at previous overall numbers of adoptions in the United States, and it looks like this new number in a new report is a record low. Please correct me if I'm wrong. For instance, I'm looking at the financial year 2015, and it was 5,648, and it was the lowest since 1981, I think. Can you give us a broader picture?

**MS LAWRENCE:** Thank you, Dmitry. I think, again, as I described, this is part of a worldwide trend, and we've seen this trend over the last 10, 12, 13, 14 years. So what I tried to emphasize is that the percentage of the children who are adopted internationally, even in the face of what is a global decline – and you can see there are many different sources that show graphs where there was a peak period globally for intercountry adoption – but the fluctuations other than that peak period have been really very minimal. And so, again, I think this is part of a global trend, but the percentage of children that are placed in homes in the United States continues to be about 50 percent, and that's even in the low years as well as in the peak years. That percentage has really not changed.

**QUESTION:** But is my understanding correct that this is a new record low, or I'm wrong in that regard?

**MS LAWRENCE:** We would have to look at many, many years of statistics, so I don't have an easy answer for you on that.

**QUESTION:** Okay. Thank you.

**MR GREENAN:** Thank you, everyone. With that, we'll conclude our call this morning. Thank you for joining us, and we now lift the embargo on the call and the report. Have a good day. Thank you.



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