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## **The Growing Crisis of Africa's Orphans**

*Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04), Chairman  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and Int'l Organizations  
Excerpts of remarks at hearing  
July 16, 2014*

Today's hearing addresses a very important humanitarian crisis: the more than fifty million children orphaned on the continent of Africa.

Indeed, to put this in perspective, as one of our witnesses today, Shimwaayi Muntamba, has pointed out, with such a number, the orphans of Africa, if grouped together in a single country, would be the fourth largest country in all of Africa—after Nigeria, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The factors contributing to this crisis are varied, starting with war and civil unrest, which have displaced millions – wars that have led to the deaths of parents and other adult relatives, leaving children to fend for themselves. Or sometimes children are separated from their parents in a mad flight for sanctuary, never learning if their mothers and fathers are alive or dead. They may never know if they are orphaned in reality, or if both parents turn out to have survived and are alive in a refugee camp somewhere else. Such parents, too, agonize over what ever happened to their children.

Other children are indirect victims of HIV/AIDS, which has wreaked such devastating havoc on the continent, or other diseases. They could have lost one or both parents to this or some other dread disease. Often being forced into the role of the primary caretaker of younger siblings, their childhood innocence is ended by the burdens of adult responsibility.

As with many of the humanitarian crises that confront the continent, there is a big picture aspect to this one, one which we as Congress certainly need to address. There are important strategic implications of so many children and adolescents left without fathers or mothers. We have all heard of the scourge of child soldiers, how orphaned children are recruited and brutalized, themselves turning into remorseless killers. Terrorist groups such as the Lord's

Resistance Army, under the rapacious warlord Joseph Kony, actively recruit child soldiers. Perhaps our State Department witness, Robert Jackson, with his vast depth of regional knowledge, may address that in his remarks today.

And if humanitarian reasons are not enough to compel Congress to rally behind the efforts to address the issue of Africa's orphans by USAID and countless charitable organizations, many of them faith-based, then strategic concerns and the effect this has on stability throughout the region, should be reason to sit up and take notice of this tragedy.

But behind every statistic about orphaned children, behind the pie charts and graphs, there is also a portrait in miniature: a lonely child who is left without a mother or a father, perhaps dealing each night with the pangs of hunger pain, or just seeking a place where one can lay one's head down in safety until the morning comes. That child awakes to forage and fend for another day. Behind every statistic, there is a young boy or girl who has to deal with the sense of abandonment, or with the trauma of having seen parents killed before his or her eyes. There is a little soul, a young person, whose inherent dignity has been scarred in a world itself wounded, where there is so much pain, suffering and darkness.

These children are in need of love and compassion, of simple needs being met. Those who do find loving homes and families are truly the lucky ones.

One remedy for this crisis is inter-country adoption, which sometimes brings children from Africa to our shores to provide them with loving homes. This is, of course, only a partial remedy, because for every child who is given a loving home, there are many more for whom there is never will be such a refuge. At best, they may end up in an institutional orphanage, which is a topic fraught with controversy. While the best ones, again often faith based, help address the developmental and educational needs of children, the worst may abet trafficking. In some cases, such institutions do not even shelter orphans *per se*, but rather children who are placed there by parents who think that their children will get better education and nutrition than what they themselves can provide. Clearly, such institutions can never provide the type of love that a father and a mother, along with any siblings, can give.

One issue that will be addressed in our second panel today, then, is the role of inter-country adoption in helping address, at least in part, the crisis of orphans. Some of the testimony will be critical of the role of our State Department's Office of Children's Issues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Such testimony needs to be heard, for we can, and we must, do better.

We also will hear about an adoption issue that has received a lot of attention on Capitol Hill and was the topic of a resolution authored by my good friend and colleague Collin Peterson of Minnesota, which I am happy to say was passed by the House just a few weeks ago, after being marked up by this subcommittee and then the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Last year, the Democratic Republic of the Congo suspended the issuance of exit permits for Congolese children adopted by foreign parents – impacting *hundreds* of U.S. families. The suspension means that Congolese children adopted by American parents cannot leave the country

to go to their new homes – even though the parents have been officially declared the legal guardians under Congolese law.

What's more, despite the exit permit suspension, Congolese courts have continued processing new adoptions, leading to a backlog of adopted children who are unable to leave the country.

More than 900 American families are caught up in varying stages of this adoption limbo – breaking hearts.

This is a *deplorable* situation for these children, and for their distraught families. Indeed, we will hear about this from one such family that has been impacted, as well as an advocate for families that have been impacted.

Finally, I also want to say a word to those parents here today who have endured not only burdens that are financial, but ones that are primarily emotional, separated from the children that they have voluntarily welcomed into their lives. Your hardship and pain is deeply noted by my colleagues and I, as well as our staff members, many of whom have worked not only on passing Congressman Peterson's resolution, but also have pushed our State Department and the Government of the DRC to resolve this issue.

Please continue to persevere, and do not give up hope! We remain in your corner.