

THE GROWING CRISIS OF AFRICA'S ORPHANS

**HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH**

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, July 31, 2014*

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, a hearing that I convened recently in my subcommittee addressed 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, Shimwaayi Muntemba, 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.

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, 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.

An issue that was addressed in the hearing was the role of inter-country adoption in helping address, at least in part, the crisis of orphans. Some of the testimony was 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 heard 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, after being marked up by my 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 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.

PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

**HON. TED POE**

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, July 31, 2014*

Mr. POE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, the Cummings Foundation, the Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project, Child Justice, and the Courageous Kids Network should be commended for their work combatting child abuse and ensuring justice for abuse victims.

Earlier this year they recognized Members of Congress who work on child abuse issues, but I think these groups are the ones who should really be recognized.

Child abuse is a horrific crime.

And it's made even worse when justice is not served.

Only a monster would harm a child.

It is an inexcusable injustice when a child is ordered by our own legal system back into an unsafe situation.

As a former judge and prosecutor and as co-chair of the Congressional Victims' Rights Caucus with my good friend JIM COSTA of California, I know how important groups like these are in advocating for victims and helping them through court proceedings.

Not only do these organizations serve children and their protective parents, who many times are also victims of abuse, but work to fix the family court system, when justice is not served.

They counsel protective parents and help children who have been wrongly placed with an abusive parent.

These groups work with the parent and courts to bring the child back into a safe situation, some providing pro bono legal assistance.

They work to educate the public on these issues and fight for a justice system that works, striving to bring real change to our society by ending domestic violence and child abuse.

Those that work with children and their families through some of the hardest situations are true heroes.

Our country was founded on the principles of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The Cummings Foundation, the Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project, Child Justice, and the Courageous Kids Network want to make sure that victims are able to live that American ideal.

Our country cannot tolerate abuse.

Justice demands that we fight back.

Because justice is what we do.

A society will be judged by how it treats the most vulnerable.

I hope that because of the work these groups are doing, our society will be judged well.

And that's just the way it is.

THE FTO REFORM ACT OF 2014

**HON. PETER T. KING**

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

*Thursday, July 31, 2014*

Mr. KING of New York. Mr. Speaker, the United States Foreign Terrorist Organization