

Hundreds of Ethiopian immigrants get warm welcome in Israel

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Hundreds of Ethiopian immigrants arrived a festive ceremony at Israel's international airport on December 3, as the government took a step toward carrying out its pledge to reunite hundreds of families split between the two countries. (AP Photo / Sebastian Scheiner)

On December 3, hundreds of Ethiopian immigrants arrived at a festive ceremony at Israel's international airport as the Israeli government took a step toward carrying out its pledge to reunite hundreds of families split between the two countries.

Some 300 people landed on the Ethiopian Airlines flight, many of them waving flags or stopping to kiss the ground as they streamed off the aircraft onto a red carpet. Many were dressed in traditional Ethiopian robes, and many women held babies in their arms. Festive Hebrew songs were blasted over loudspeakers.

Although the families are of Jewish descent and many are practicing Jews, Israel does not consider them Jewish under religious law. Instead, they were permitted to enter the country under a family unification program that requires special government approval.

A large delegation of Israeli officials welcomed the group, and Pnina Tamano-Shata, the country's first Ethiopian-born cabinet minister, traveled to Ethiopia to join them on the flight.

"My wife Sara and myself were standing there with tears in our eyes," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a welcoming ceremony. "This is the essence of our Jewish story, the essence of the Zionist story."

Community activists have accused the government of dragging its feet in implementing a 2015 decision to bring all remaining Ethiopians of Jewish lineage—many of whom have suffered from religious persecution, famine, and civil conflict—to Israel within five years. Netanyahu's Likud party repeated that pledge before national elections early this year.

Activists promoting family unification estimate that some 7,000 Ethiopian Jews remain behind in Ethiopia, some of whom have been waiting for years to join their families.

"Once again, the government led by Prime Minister Netanyahu has decided to place quotas on the immigration of Jews from Ethiopia," said Muket Fenta, an activist who has been fighting for over a decade to bring his aunt to Israel.

"The government is celebrating a few hundred immigrants from Ethiopia, while thousands were supposed to be here and are still left behind while their fate is in question," he said. —Associated Press