

Israel to approve immigration for 1,000 Ethiopian Jews

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Members of Ethiopia's Jewish community hold pictures of their relatives in Israel during a solidarity event at a synagogue in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2018. AP Photo/Mulugeta Ayene.

The Israeli government announced that it agreed to accept 1,000 Ethiopian Jews, a fraction of the nation's 8,000 Jews, who activists are hoping can all move to Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said a special committee had agreed to allow community members who already have children in Israel to immigrate. It was not clear what will happen to the remaining 7,000 people.

The 8,000 are descendants of Ethiopian Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity around a century ago, though many of them practice Judaism. Israel

doesn't consider them Jewish under strict religious law, meaning their immigration requires special approval. The Israeli government views bringing them to Israel as an act of family reunification rather than aliyah, or immigration to Israel from the Jewish diaspora.

Alisa Bodner, a spokeswoman for Struggle for Ethiopian Aliyah, a group petitioning Israel's government to allow Ethiopian Jews to immigrate, called Netanyahu's decision an "incredible disappointment" and "another spit in the face" for Israel's Ethiopian community.

Israel agreed in 2015 to bring the remaining Ethiopians to Israel but has not authorized funding for their move.

Avraham Neguse, an Ethiopian-Israeli lawmaker and member of the special committee, said that while he welcomes the government's decision, he was disappointed that this issue has yet to be resolved.

"We won't cease in our mission, our struggle, until everyone is reunited with their family here in Israel," he said.

Neguse said the committee did not discuss plans for the remaining 7,000 Ethiopian Jews.

Israel is home to approximately 144,000 Jews of Ethiopian descent, the majority of whom immigrated to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. Last year Israel approved immigration for 1,300 Ethiopians with relatives who had already immigrated.

The immigrants' assimilation into Israeli society hasn't been smooth, with many arriving without a formal education and then falling into unemployment and poverty. Ethiopian Jews have also protested in recent years against perceived discrimination in Israeli society. —Associated Press

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