One-year adoption ban essential to preven

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INDIAN activists called on Thursday for a one-year adoption ban to prevent human traffickers from exploiting children orphaned in the tsunami disaster for cheap labour or the sex trade.

"The Indian government should slap a ban on adoption from tusnami-affected coastal districts for at least a year," said Sheelu Francis of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective Training Centre, a non-governmental outfit looking after women's issues.

"In the guise of adoption, human trafficking may happen. They make take this opportunity to snatch children for making them work in factories or homes or use them for (the) sex trade," she told the news agency.

Francis said the one year ban would allow the affected children to come to terms with the disaster and also give time to counsellors to help cure those suffering psychological trauma.

"A group of agencies and organisations have written to the government to implement the ban with immediate effect," she said.

Thirty-two children are housed in a government-run orphanage centre, about two kilometres (just over a mile) from the southern Indian district of Nagapattinam where more than 6,000 people died in the December 26 tsunamis.

Twelve of the kids have lost both their parents while 20 have a single parent.

Teachers at the government orphanage in a rented two-storey building teach the children English and volunteers and activists who have arrived from neighbouring states counsel them.

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A doctor is on call for the day while policewomen guard the centre round-the-clock.

"A ban on adoption for the short-term is the best way to ensure that the children get over the shock of losing their parents," said Anita Desai, programme officer at the Dorabji Tata Trust.

"It will also ensure that the antecedents of the people who are willing to adopt the children are checked so that no human trafficking is involved."

Desai said the government must allow non-governmental organisations to help the

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children with counselling and trauma care.

"The best thing that the government can do is to find a relative or the single parent to take the children home. If that fails these children need special care. It will not happen at a centre with 30 children," Desai said.

"In relief camps the children also face sexual harassment," she claimed.

Government permission is required for a private organisation willing to set up an orphanage in India. Strict guidelines and rules are in force for a foreigner wanting to adopt an Indian child.

Prashant Mali, head of the Byford Charitable Institution, said the tsunami orphans must be handed over to outfits, which can take care of their emotional needs. "The history of (state-run) orphanages in India shows that they have failed to make the children humane," Mali said. "The government officials are not bothered to teach the kids any values. For them it is just a job."

"These children require love and affection and not good clothes. The government officer does not work on an emotional level," he said.

Government officials defended the move to house the orphans in their centre and said they were in no hurry to give them away for adoption.

"We are very careful on the issue of adoption. No decision has been taken on the ban," said district collector Veerashanmugha Moni, the district's top bureaucrat.

Parveen Nisha, a 15-year-old orphan at the government centre, said she was still in a state of shock.

"I do not know," Nisha said when asked whether she would prefer adoption. "But I want to study, get a job and take care of my younger sister." AFP