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53 Haitian Orphans Are Airlifted to U.S.

By [JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.](#) and SEAN D. HAMILL

MIAMI — A group of 53 Haitian orphans landed in Pittsburgh on Tuesday morning, the first wave to arrive after the United States loosened its policy on visa requirements to expedite Americans' adoptions of parentless children living in the post-[earthquake](#) ruins.

But the new policy, announced late Monday, affects only 900 children whom the Haitian government had already identified as orphans, and whom adoption agencies had matched with couples in the United States.

Tens of thousands of children are believed to have been orphaned in the quake, and their fate remains unclear, aid groups and [United Nations](#) officials say.

Catholic leaders in Miami are pushing both governments to have children who appear to be orphaned airlifted to temporary group homes in South Florida. Several aid groups who focus on children, however, say every effort should be made to reunite them with relatives.

It normally takes three years to adopt a child from [Haiti](#), because of a lengthy process required under Haitian law. The Haitian government has had reason to be cautious; there are about 200 orphanages in Haiti, but United Nations officials say not all are legitimate. Some are fronts for traffickers who buy children from their parents and sell them to couples in other countries. "In orphanages in Haiti there are an awful lot of children who are not orphans," said Christopher de Bono, a [Unicef](#) spokesman.

Under the new policy, announced Monday night by the Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#), the United States is waiving visa requirements on humanitarian grounds for Haitian children already in the pipeline for adoption. Some adoptions had already been approved by Haitian authorities, but the United States also agreed to let in other children who had been

matched with American parents but had not gotten a final blessing from Haitian officials.

“The U.S. government has never done this in the past,” said Mary F. Robinson, president of the [National Council for Adoption](#). “They are really going all out to expedite the process.”

[Homeland Security Department](#) officials said they were walking a fine line, trying to let in bona fide orphans without opening the floodgates to all children who have been separated from their parents.

“We remain focused on family unification and must be vigilant not to separate children from relatives in Haiti who are still alive but displaced, or to unknowingly assist criminals who traffic in children in such desperate times,” said Matthew Chandler, a spokesman for the department.

[Gov. Edward G. Rendell](#) of Pennsylvania played an instrumental role in bringing the first planeload of children out of Haiti, and the bureaucratic difficulties his team faced underscore the legal and moral complexities of transferring hundreds of children to a new country in the middle of a catastrophe that has crippled the Haitian government.

“There were many times we thought we were coming back with no one,” Mr. Rendell said Tuesday in Pittsburgh. After an all-night journey on two planes, the children — some wrapped in blankets, some carried by nurses and doctors, some walking and waving — came off a donated jet at Pittsburgh International Airport just after 9 a.m. and were taken by bus to the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of U.P.M.C. with a police escort.

Some of their adoptive parents waited anxiously while doctors examined the children, most of whom are under the age of 4.

“We just kept expecting the worst-case scenario, that they wouldn’t survive, that they’d be looted, that they’d run out of water,” said Jill Lear of Watertown, S.D., who arrived with her husband, Bruce, to wait for two children they were to adopt.

Mr. Rendell and Representative Jason Altmire flew Monday to Haiti on a chartered plane carrying medical supplies and 20 doctors and nurses. The plan was to drop off the supplies and pick up children from an orphanage run by two sisters, Jamie and Alison McMutrie from a Pittsburgh suburb, Ben Avon, Pa..

The orphanage was so badly damaged that the McMutrie sisters and the children were living in a courtyard. With a borrowed cellphone, they sent out appeals for help, saying they had only

enough provisions for a few days.

Having lobbied the White House for several days, the Pennsylvania delegation had obtained United States visas for the children and had expected to be on the ground one hour. But Haitian officials would let only 28 of the 54 orphans the sisters had brought to the airport to leave; the rest had not cleared all the hurdles for adoption. Seven had yet to be matched with adoptive parents, the Haitians said.

Then the sisters dug in their heels. "They just said no, they wouldn't leave without all of them," Mr. Altmire said.

For five hours, the delegation worked furiously to get the Haitian government to agree to let all the children go. The governor's wife, Judge Marjorie O. Rendell of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, went to Port-au-Prince to meet with American diplomats. Mr. Rendell and Mr. Altmire lobbied the White House, which pressured Haitian officials.

The chartered plane was forced to return to Miami before a deal was reached, Mr. Rendell said, but the delegation stayed in Haiti. But at 11 p.m., the Haitian officials relented and the children were evacuated on a United States military cargo plane to Orlando, Fla., where they transferred to the jet to Pennsylvania. One child was found to be missing at the last minute in Haiti, and Jamie McMurtre stayed behind to find her. They were expected to arrive here Wednesday.

James C. McKinley Jr. reported from Miami, and Sean D. Hamill from Pittsburgh.