

Foreign adoptions by Americans plunge

By David Crary

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Foreign adoptions

The number of foreign children adopted by Americans dropped sharply in 2006. Adoptions from China, the No. 1 source of children since 2000, fell 18 percent last year.

Visas issued to orphans coming to the U.S.



Source: Bureau of Consular Affairs

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NEW YORK — After tripling in the past 15 years, the number of foreign children adopted by Americans dropped sharply in 2006, the result of multiple factors that have jolted adoption advocates and prompted many would-be adoptive parents to reconsider their options.

The consequences could be profound for the growing numbers of Americans interested in adopting abroad. Already, some have had their hopes quashed by tightened eligibility rules in China; adoptions from Africa, where millions of children have been orphaned by AIDS and wars, could increase if those from China and Eastern Europe continue to decrease.

Declines were recorded last year in nearly all countries that recently have been the top sources of adopted children in the United States: China, Russia, South Korea and Ukraine among them. Increases from less familiar alternatives — Ethiopia, Liberia, Haiti and Vietnam — partly offset the drop, but some experts think the era of constantly surging foreign adoption has ended.

"The huge growth rates you saw in the '90s; I think that's over," said Thomas DiFilipo, president of the Joint Council on International Children's Services.

He urged Americans considering international adoption to "reassess any preconceived notions they have ... and get educated on the myriad options that are available."

Overall, according to new State Department figures, international adoptions by Americans dropped to 20,679 in the 2006 fiscal year from 22,728 in 2005, the first significant decline since 1992.

Adoptions from China, the No. 1 source of children since 2000, fell 18 percent, from 7,906 to 6,493, while adoptions from Russia, the No. 2 source for the previous six years, dropped about 20 percent to a 10-year low of 3,706. Both are among many nations trying to change their child-welfare systems and increase domestic adoptions.

In some cases, reform campaigns are coupled with skepticism toward foreign adoption, including concern about occasional cases of abuse. Romania has banned adoptions by

foreigners, except for relatives; Ukraine and Kazakhstan insist foreign parents submit regular reports on their adopted children.

Thomas Atwood, president of the National Council for Adoption, said the drop is understandable and worrisome.

"There's always been the issue of national pride, where the country of origin wants to take care of their children themselves," he said. "But there are so many orphans that an increase in domestic adoptions shouldn't result in a decrease of international adoptions. We urge these countries to be enthusiastic toward both."

Atwood sees potential for increased U.S. adoptions from Brazil, Mexico and India.

For many would-be adoptive parents in the United States, however, China is the country of choice because its adoption system is considered honest and efficient, and its orphanage population — mostly abandoned baby girls — is considered healthier on average than those in many other countries.

Now there is widespread concern over last year's drop in adoptions and China's recent announcement of new rules, to take effect May 1, regarding who can adopt. They give priority to stable married couples between 30 and 50. Single people, and those suffering from obesity or depression, will lose out.

Among those dismayed by the rules is Ann Freeman, 42, a travel agent from West Valley City, Utah, whose dream of adopting a Chinese child has been dashed by the new curb on single parents.

"I'm heartbroken," she said.

The only major country of origin to increase U.S. adoptions in 2006 was Guatemala, with 4,135 adoptions. It overtook Russia in the No. 2 spot.

However, that status is expected to change this year when the U.S. ratifies the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoptions, a pact setting tough standards that Guatemala's corruption-prone adoption system doesn't meet. Adoptions may be suspended while Guatemala tries to make required changes; some doubt the number will ever return to last year's level.