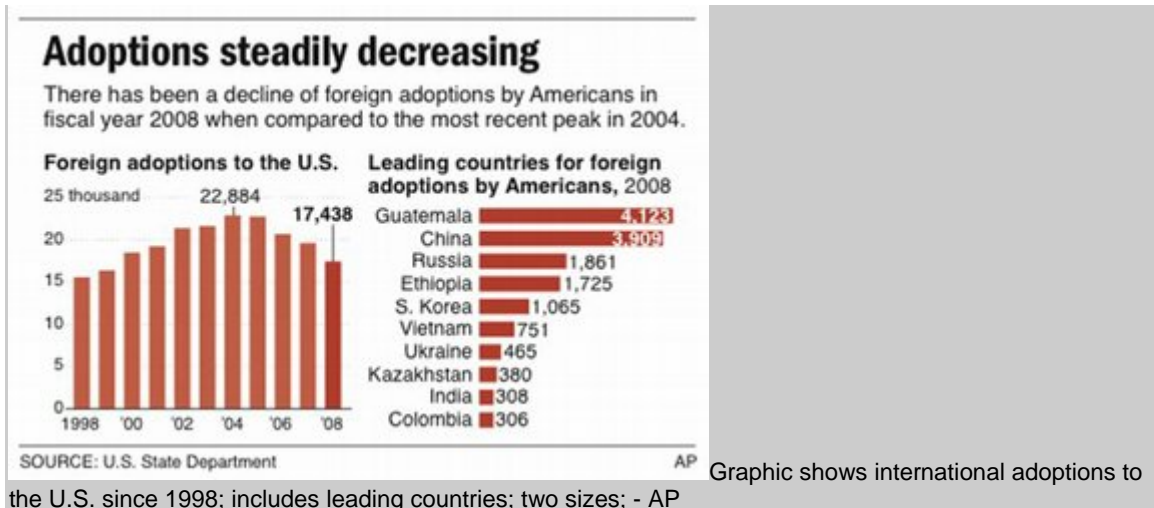


Foreign adoptions by Americans drop sharply

By DAVID CRARY, The Associated Press

4:32 p.m. November 17, 2008



NEW YORK — The number of foreign children adopted by Americans fell 12 percent in the past year, reaching the lowest level since 1999 as some countries clamped down on the process and others battled with allegations of adoption fraud.

China, which for a decade was the leading source for international adoptions, accounted for the biggest decline and dropped out of the top spot. It was replaced by Guatemala, which almost certainly will lose that status in 2009 because of a corruption-related moratorium on new adoptions imposed by U.S. officials.

Figures for the 2008 fiscal year, released by the State Department on Monday, showed 17,438 adoptions from abroad, down from 19,613 in 2007. The all-time peak was 22,884 in 2004.

Reasons for the decline vary from country to country. China and Russia — the two largest sources of adoptees over the past 15 years — have sought to care for more of their abandoned and orphaned children at home, and China has imposed tighter restrictions on foreign applicants.

The numbers were sobering to advocates of international adoption, who expect the drop to continue for 2009 as Guatemala struggles to rein in its formerly freewheeling adoption industry.

"There are still tens of millions of orphans around the world — and we know there are millions of Americans willing to adopt these kids," said Chuck Johnson, chief operating officer of the National Council for Adoption. "Countries are very reluctant to let go of what they consider their future, even though they'll readily acknowledge the future for these kids is not promising."

By far the biggest drop was for adoptions from China, which fell to 3,909 from 5,453 in 2007 and a peak of 7,906 in 2005. Among the factors: a rise in domestic adoptions as China prospers and tighter restrictions on foreign adoptions that exclude single people, older couples, the obese and those with financial or health problems.

As a result, waiting times to complete an adoption from China have increased in many cases to three or four years, a deterrent to many aspiring adoptive parents. China offers a faster timetable for foreigners willing to adopt children with physical or emotional disabilities.

Adoptions from Guatemala also declined in the past year, from 4,728 to 4,123, and the number is projected to be sharply lower for 2009. Guatemalan officials are trying to replace an old system, which allowed abuses ranging from fraud to child snatching, with stringent new practices conforming with the Hague Convention, an international adoption treaty.

Other countries from which adoptions declined significantly included Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan and India.

The biggest increase was in adoptions from Ethiopia _ they rose from 1,255 to 1,725, moving the Horn of Africa nation into fourth place on the State Department's list, just behind Russia. No other African country provided more than 250 adoptees last year, although the continent is viewed as one of the few potential growth regions for international adoption.

Thomas DiFilipo, president of the Joint Council on International Children's Services, predicted overall numbers would drop even more sharply for 2009, to as low as 10,000 to 12,000 foreign adoptions, as China continues its cutback and adoptions from Guatemala and Vietnam diminish.

There were 751 adoptions from Vietnam in fiscal 2008, but the U.S.-Vietnam adoption agreement expired on Sept. 1 as the two countries argued about fraud and corruption in the system. Hundreds of American families seeking to adopt from Vietnam were left in limbo.

DiFilipo said he doubted any foreign country would ever replace China as the source of 7,000 or even 5,000 adoptees per year. He predicted instead that far smaller numbers of adoptees would be coming from a pool of perhaps 40 or 50 countries, including an increasing share from Africa and Latin America.

DiFilipo said the drop-off in foreign adoptions has been devastating to many U.S.-based agencies which specialize in them _ forcing closures or mergers. He predicted that the number of direct-service agencies with programs abroad would drop to fewer than 100 by the end of 2009, a third of the peak a few years ago.

"It's a rough time for the agencies," said Joshua Zhong, president of Colorado-based Chinese Children Adoption International. "It is more difficult for the families. They feel they're waiting forever; they're very discouraged."

Zhong said his agency _ one of the largest in the U.S. that specializes in adoptions from China _ expects to place 450 children by the end of the year, down from about 1,200 in 2005. The average waiting time for his clients has stretched from 12 months to three years, he said.

One byproduct of the decline in foreign adoptions is likely to be an intensified campaign to persuade adoptive parents to take children from the U.S. foster care system. Roughly 125,000 youths in the system are available for adoption, including a disproportionately large number of racial minorities.

"We're urging families to think about these kids," said Chuck Johnson. "We have a lot of work to do."