

Guatemala annuls 15 adoption cases

By RODRIGO ESTRADA – May 21, 2008

GUATEMALA CITY (AP) — Guatemala's attorney general said Wednesday he has annulled 15 pending adoptions to U.S. couples after finding evidence of fraud or other irregularities.

Attorney General Baudilio Portillo suspended all of Guatemala's 2,286 pending adoption cases in early May to investigate them. So far officials have looked into 160 cases. Of those, 145 have been cleared to move forward and 15 have been annulled.

The babies whose cases have been annulled will be put in foster homes until a judge locates their parents. If their parents aren't found, they will be put up for adoption again.

"We believe that, over time, the number of cases with irregularities will grow in the same proportion that we are seeing now with these 15 cases," Jorge Meng, the attorney general's office spokesman, told The Associated Press.

The irregularities were serious enough that the attorney general filed criminal complaints against lawyers, doctors, social workers and birth mothers involved in the 15 cases, Meng said.

Guatemala has been plagued by allegations of adoption fraud, including claims that babies are stolen from their birth parents or even sold by poor birth mothers.

A new law that went into effect in January is aimed at cleaning up the system by creating an independent council to oversee adoptions.

Before the council was created, private lawyers and notaries did everything from recruit pregnant women to obtain U.S. visas for the adopted children. The process was expensive, costing U.S. couples about US\$30,000 (euro19,000) for each child.

But it was fast, usually lasting less than six months. That made Guatemala the second largest source of adopted children to U.S. couples, after China.

The new system is expected to be less expensive, but also slower. Adoptive parents will be assigned babies, instead of being able to choose them from a set of pictures, as they did before.

Bureaucratic delays kept the council from being able to process adoptions until just recently, and few new adoption cases have been started under the new law.

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