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Illegal Guatemalan foster home raid finds 46 babies

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By Mica Rosenberg

ANTIGUA, Guatemala (Reuters) - Guatemalan police found 46 children, some just 3 days old, in an illegal foster home in the tourist city of Antigua on Saturday, the latest scandal for the country's corruption-riddled adoption system.

Carlos Azurdia, an official from the country's adoption regulator, said two women were arrested in the raid.

"There are newborns and children up to three-year-olds," Azurdia said. "None of them had the proper paperwork to be given up for adoption."

Guatemala has the highest per-capita adoption rate in the world, a lucrative business for private lawyers who run the trade and are sometimes accused of forging papers or paying mothers to sell their children.

Close to 5,000 babies and children were adopted from the small Central American nation last year. Adoptive parents say some lawyers charge up to \$40,000 to handle adoptions.

Police and soldiers who stormed into the house on the outskirts of Antigua, a colonial tourist town an hour's drive west of the capital, found babies and children kept in three rooms divided by their age.

After the raid, children could be heard crying through the windows as officials and doctors examined their health.

Over the weekend, the government will decide where the children will be transferred.

Under pressure from Washington, Guatemalan lawmakers ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption earlier this year. This will strengthen adoption rules in the country.

The international treaty does not take effect until January 1 and the United Nations has called for adoptions to be suspended until that time.

Newspaper articles about suspected child traffickers have fueled rumors of baby-snatching. Several communities have attacked suspected culprits, in a few cases beating or burning them alive.

The United States recently announced it would require two DNA tests on Guatemalan babies being adopted by Americans before issuing visas, in an effort to clean up the process.

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