

GUATEMALA-ADOPTIONS Oct-29-2007 (1,040 words) With photo. xxxi

## **Observers: Impact of Guatemalan adoption reform remains to be seen**

By Ezra Fieser  
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GUATEMALA CITY (CNS) -- In a quiet neighborhood, rows of cribs line the walls of an orphanage. Each crib is marked with a child's name, a birth date and the name of a family:

"Angela Belen Chez, Oct. 13. Curran Family."

"Eduardo Javier, Sept. 17. Cowden Family."

The cribs are separated by months of birth: September babies in one room, October births in the next. Nearby, women who recently gave birth recover in one house, and expectant women prepare in another.

For years, this predominantly Catholic Central American country has been known as an epicenter of international adoptions. The proximity to the United States and lack of red tape has made Guatemala the largest per capita source of adoptions in the world.

Adoptions have helped finance the operations of many of the country's orphanages, who say they provide a service for an estimated 370,000 orphans otherwise ignored by the government in this impoverished country.

"Without adoptions, we couldn't provide health care for these mothers or provide education and services for these kids," said Heather Radu, who runs Hannah's Hope orphanage in Guatemala City.

But a pending reform would overhaul the system, raising speculation that the adoption industry, estimated by Guatemala's vice president to be worth \$400 million a year, will be shattered and the children who receive care will be left with few choices.

"The government doesn't help in any of this," said Mitchell Globus, referring to services for abandoned or homeless children. Globus represents Casa de Angeles, a Catholic orphanage located about an hour's drive from Guatemala City; the orphanage provides homes to children "left on doorsteps, abandoned by a disintegrating family ... or given away by a family member."

Last year, 4,800 of those children were adopted, with 95 percent of them going to the United States.

But the same lax regulatory system that made adopting Guatemalans inexpensive and relatively speedy -- typically about six to nine months -- left the system open for abuse, according to critics.

Accounts of abductions are widespread, particularly in the remote countryside, where residents have been known to form mobs and attack suspected kidnappers. And reports of pregnant women being paid for their children have been documented by human rights organizations.

International pressure to fix abuses led the Guatemalan government to order the system to comply with international standards. The government has said the change is needed to get the

system out of the hands of a network of lawyers who have been accused of turning hefty profits at the expense of unknowing, or sometimes unwilling, parents.

Guatemalan President Oscar Berger said Oct. 16 that any change was not intended to disrupt adoptions already under way, only to ensure they are just. But the U.S. State Department has recommended couples not adopt from Guatemala, and UNICEF has said the authenticity of pending adoptions should be verified.

For some 3,700 families currently in the process, the tug of war has left their adoptions in question. As early as Nov. 4, the Guatemalan Congress is set to take up the law and debate how it will be implemented.

"If we had started six months later, I don't know what would have happened," said David Williams of Illinois, whose adoption of 10-month-old Joseph was finalized in October. "There were a few weeks there when nobody seemed to know what was going to happen."

Williams said the process was simple: About \$24,000, dozens of phone calls, and three trips from Illinois to Guatemala City, where he and his wife stayed at the Westin Camino Real, a hotel known as a spot where adoptive parents stay. As Williams spoke, three foreign couples passed through the hotel's opulent lobby, pushing strollers with Guatemalan children.

In the United States, Williams said the couple faced a lengthier, albeit potentially cheaper, process.

"I never felt like the process of adopting here was anything but proper," he said.

However, most involved in the process say the system is in need of change.

"Guatemala does not have an adoption law. And the way it is done, has too many weak points," said Angelina Galdamez, administrative director of Casa Guatemala, which runs an orphanage in Rio Dulce near the Caribbean coast and a home for adolescent girls in Guatemala City.

The system makes it "easy for corruption, and children are unprotected," she said.

Radu said: "I've never seen anything like it. It's an absolute mess.

"And the people who suffer are the mothers and the families," said Radu, whose orphanage expects to have as many as 90 children adopted this year, nearly all by U.S. families.

Radu opened the orphanage in 2000. It has never been inspected by the government, she said.

For Hannah's Hope, government involvement in the process, as proposed under the law change, would be two-sided: It would bring a need measure of oversight but likely would mean less money.

Members of the Guatemalan Congress have said adoptions are too expensive and that any law change would bring down the cost. The U.S. State Department said some parents have paid more than \$35,000 to adopt a Guatemalan child. A cap closer to \$7,000 per adoption has been discussed publicly by members of the Guatemalan Congress.

Exactly how the new law will be implemented remains to be seen, but for orphanages, the impact already has started.

For Radu, who funds the \$1 million-per-year operation nearly entirely with the \$20,000 she gets from each adoption, that could mean shutting her doors. She said that already she has laid off half of her administrative staff of 12 and has seen 20 prospective families drop out of the process.

She said she fears that there would be no option for the children that receive care through private orphanages, such as 9-month-old Miguel, who has cerebral palsy. The court called Hannah's Hope about six months ago and asked if the orphanage could take him. Court officials did not mention his disability. The \$1,500 the orphanage pays monthly for therapy for Miguel and a handful of other special needs cases may have to be dropped due to the slowdown in adoptions, Radu said.

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