

Foreign adoptions by Americans hit 13-year low

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AP – FILE - In a Tuesday, May 27, 2008 photo, an unidentified woman holds a child for adoption as she waits ...

By DAVID CRARY, AP National Writer David Crary, Ap National Writer – Thu Dec 17, 5:47 pm ET

NEW YORK – The number of foreign children adopted by Americans plunged more than a quarter in the past year, reaching the lowest level since 1996 and leading adoption advocates to urge Congress to help reverse the trend.

Big declines were recorded for all three countries that provided the most adopted children in the previous fiscal year. In China and Russia, government officials have been trying to promote domestic adoptions, while in Guatemala, a once-bustling but highly corrupt international adoption industry was shut down while reforms are implemented.

Figures for fiscal year 2009, released by the State Department on Thursday, showed 12,753 adoptions from abroad, down from 17,438 in 2008 — a dip of 27 percent and nearly 45 percent lower than the all-time peak of 22,884 in 2004.

The last time there were fewer foreign adoptions to the U.S. was in 1996, when there were 11,340.

China was the No. 1 source country in 2009 — but U.S. adoptions from there dropped to 3,001, compared with 3,909 in 2008. China has been steadily cutting back the numbers of healthy, well-adjusted orphans being made available for adoptions; a majority of Chinese children now available to U.S. adoptive families have special physical or emotional needs.

Guatemala was the No. 1 source country in 2008, with 4,123 adoptions by Americans. But the number sank to 756 for 2009, virtually all of them in the final few months before the Central American country's adoption industry was shut down while authorities drafted reforms. It's not known when adoptions to the U.S. will resume.

The biggest increase came from Ethiopia — 2,277 adoptions in fiscal 2009, compared with 1,725 in 2008.

Russia was No. 4 in the new listing with 1,586 adoptions, a 15 percent drop.

Adoptions from Vietnam — where the industry, like Guatemala's, has been plagued by corruption allegations — dropped from 751 to 481. The bilateral U.S.-Vietnam adoption agreement expired in September and has not been renewed.

Chuck Johnson, chief operating officer of the National Council for Adoption, said the new figures dismayed him and other advocates of international adoption.

"This drop is not a result of fewer orphans or less interest from American families in adopting children from other countries," he said. "All of us are very discouraged because we see the suffering taking place. We don't know how to fix it without the U.S. government coming alongside."

According to Johnson, the State Department considers its current adoption mandate to be assisting U.S. citizens with foreign adoption procedures and monitoring the integrity of foreign countries' adoption industries.

Johnson said he would like the mandate expanded to give the department explicit authority to encourage more international adoptions, and he suggested a first step could be made if Congress passed a proposed bill called the Families for Orphans Act.

Johnson also said all parties who have tolerated corrupt adoption practices bore some of the blame for the dwindling numbers.

"People in the practice of adoption worldwide have made ethical blunders that have cast a shadow over intercountry adoptions," he said. "It's highlighted how difficult it is for some of these countries to adequately supervise the adoption process, and led some countries to decide it's just not worth the effort."

Thomas DiFilipo, president of the Joint Council on International Children's Services, predicted the numbers for fiscal 2010 would be even lower — down to about 9,800 — if adoptions from Vietnam remained suspended by the U.S. government and China continued to cut back.

DiFilipo said he'd like to see the State Department become a more active promoter of international adoption.

"One of their primary functions is to help potential adoptive parents, when their focus should be on children in need of adoptive families," DiFilipo said. "The Families for Orphans Act would fill that void."

Adoptions of Chinese children by Americans peaked in fiscal 2005 at 7,906 and have fallen steadily since then. Some U.S. families have been waiting roughly four years for their adoption applications to be completed.

At Great Wall China Adoption, based in Austin, Texas, spokeswoman Kelly Ayoub said the agency placed nearly 1,000 children from China in 2005 and would probably place only one-fifth of that number this year.

"Of course families are frustrated by the wait," she said in an e-mail. "Families that are being matched right now have waited 45 months — an investment of time that no one expected."

Like some other agencies, Great Wall China is branching out geographically — advising families to consider Ethiopia, Rwanda, Mexico and the Philippines, among other places.

Among the Americans engaged in a long wait for an adoption from China is Steve Curtis of Millburn, N.J. He and his wife applied in October 2007 to adopt a second child as a sister to Amelia, whom they adopted from China the previous year.

"Unfortunately, we are STILL waiting, with no end in sight," Curtis said in an e-mail last week. "We're thinking of throwing in the towel but are keeping the faith."