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Adoptions in Guatemala face U.S. ban

Abuses cited in Central American nation, the No. 2 source for American families

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His name will be Ethan. And if the paperwork goes through, he will live in Washington as part of an adoption wave that put 1 percent of all children born last year in Guatemala on the path to becoming U.S. citizens.

But if Guatemala does not overhaul its unregulated, profit-driven and much-criticized adoption process, the baby may never become Ethan and thousands of other Guatemalan babies may never come to the United States.

The U.S. plans to bar adoptions from Guatemala unless government officials in the Central American nation comply with an international agreement aimed at protecting potential adoptees. Last year Guatemala climbed to second on the list of countries providing children for adoption to the U.S.

"Young girls are being paid to be pregnant, and nine months later they give the child away and they receive money for that," said Manuel Manrique, UNICEF's representative in Guatemala. "We know of cases that have happened of that sort."

Guatemalan lawmakers are working on reform legislation, but there are no guarantees it will pass, according to Jose Guillermo Castillo, Guatemala's ambassador to Washington.

"At the end of the day it's a big business for some people, and they are lobbying very firmly against changes in the current legislation," he said.

State Department warning

The State Department issued an unusual warning last week "strongly" urging Americans to "carefully consider their options" before proceeding with Guatemalan adoptions.

On a recent morning, the 5-month-old foster child who would be Ethan rested securely in the arms of the American who, with his wife, hopes to make the boy their first child. The would-be family was in the lobby of Guatemala City's Marriott, known as the "adoption hotel" because of the flow of Americans picking up adopted babies.

The hotel features a baby lounge and 27 rooms specially equipped for adoptive families. But the flow of Americans has slowed, noted Monica Abdalla, hotel sales manager.

With President Bush preparing for a March 12 meeting in Guatemala City with President Oscar Berger, the State Department says it will end all U.S. adoptions of Guatemalans if Guatemala does not retool what UNICEF calls an unregulated, \$150-million-a-year industry rife with abuse born of profit.

Manrique and adoption advocates want Bush to talk to Berger about the adoption situation.

"Five minutes is all it would take to bring it into the forefront and let him know," said Marshall Williams of Edna Gladney Center in Ft. Worth, one of America's most respected adoption agencies.

Catherine Barry, the State Department's point person on overseas adoptions, said the topic "may very well come up" when the two presidents meet.

The State Department's Feb. 21 warning came after a Florida adoption facilitator's arrest on charges of falsifying records to bring a Guatemalan child into the U.S.

The case against Mary Bonn, according to the State Department, shows that "the adoption process is not adequately protecting all children." Investigators found evidence of child smuggling and misrepresentation of children's health status.

Recently, U.S. immigration officials in Guatemala have denied visas for adoptions because of "wrong and unethical practices," the State Department said.

Concerns about children

"These include cases where the purported biological mother of a child is not the true biological mother but an impostor and cases where the biological parent or parents have been deceived and there has been no true relinquishment of parental rights," the department said, branding the Guatemalan adoption situation "volatile and unpredictable."

But some say the proposed changes could block many legitimate adoptions.

"My concern is Guatemala will pass this cookie-cutter thing that ultimately causes children to languish in poorly run orphanages," said Kevin Kreutner of Milwaukee, father of two adopted Guatemalan children and spokesman for the guatadopt.com Web site. Still, he acknowledges "some need for reform in the Guatemalan system."

"There are children down here that need homes. If Americans are willing to go through the process, why shouldn't they be able to take the babies home?" said the prospective mom in the Marriott lobby in Guatemala City.

State Department officials and adoption advocates agree, saying they see an out-of-control system dominated by Guatemalan lawyers collecting up to \$30,000 per adoption.

Barry, deputy assistant secretary for overseas citizens services, said Americans who adopt children in Guatemala, a country of 12 million people, may not understand the situation.

"They don't know where their money is going," she said. "I'm assuming most American citizens would be horrified at the thought that money was unduly influencing the decision of a birth mother."

In Guatemala, Susana Luarca Saracho, a leading adoption lawyer, has been sharp in her criticism of the UNICEF-backed reforms.

"We are more determined than ever to shield the children from the evil agenda of UNICEF," she wrote in a statement posted on guatadopt.com. She declined a request for an interview.

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