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International adoptions plummet globally

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HANOI, Vietnam (AP) - The number of international adoptions has plummeted to its lowest point in 15 years, a steep decline attributed largely to crackdowns against baby-selling, a sputtering world economy and efforts by countries to place more children with domestic families.



In this June 12, 2006 file photo, children waiting for adoptions are seen in a house held by a lawyer specialized in adoptions in Guatemala City, Guatemala. The number of international adoptions has plummeted to its lowest point in 15 years, a steep decline attributed largely to crackdowns against baby-selling, a sputtering world economy and efforts by countries to place more children with domestic families. (AP Photo/Alexandre Meneghini, File)

Globally, the number of orphans being adopted by foreign parents dropped from a high of 45,000 in 2004 to an estimated 25,000 last year, according to annual statistics compiled by Peter Selman, an expert on international adoptions at Britain's Newcastle University.

Some adoption advocates argue the decrease is also linked to a set of strict international guidelines known as the Hague Adoption Convention. Devised to ensure transparency and child protection following a rash of baby-selling and kidnapping scandals, critics say the guidelines have also been used by leading adopting nations, such as the U.S., as a pretext for freezing adoptions altogether from some countries that are out of compliance.

"It should have been a real step forward, but it's been used in a way that's made it a force for shutting down countries," says Elizabeth Bartholet, a Harvard Law professor who promotes international adoptions. "That affects thousands of children every year."

She says places where international adoptions are stopped may ultimately see more children stuck in orphanages or on the street where they could fall prey to sex traffickers. "I question whether it's ever true where adoption is all about buying and selling and kidnapping," Bartholet says.

U.S. adoption officials and international agencies such as UNICEF say the Hague rules, which require countries to set up a central adoption authority and a system of checks and balances, are necessary to safeguard orphans

and keep profit-driven players from corrupting a system that should be purely about helping unwanted children.

Alison Dilworth, adoptions division chief at the U.S. Office of Children's Issues and a strong supporter of the Hague guidelines, says they shield adoptive parents from everyone's worst nightmare: "God forbid, that knock on the door ... saying your child that you have raised and loved and is fully integrated into your family was stolen from a birth parent who is desperately trying to look for them."

Much has changed from a decade ago, when busloads of would-be foreign parents flocked to orphanages in poor countries such as China, Vietnam and Guatemala to take babies home following a relatively quick, easy process.

Waits have become increasingly longer and requirements stiffer, with some countries now refusing obese or single adoptive parents and requiring proof of a certain amount of cash in the bank. Countries embroiled in scandals have pulled the plug on their programs, or been cut off by the U.S. and other countries, leaving hundreds of children caught in bureaucratic limbo.

Sharon Brooks, 56, of New York, knows the story all too well. She waited three and a half years for the release of a little girl in Vietnam after the U.S. froze adoptions there in 2008 amid serious fraud concerns. Finally, in January, Brooks learned the child she had named Akira-Li would instead be adopted by a Vietnamese family.

"That was my one shot," says Brooks, who now believes she is too old to qualify for most international adoptions. "Everything in my life has been at a standstill."

Vietnam joined the Hague convention on Feb. 1, and U.S. officials say they are hopeful adoptions will resume within the next year.

Shutdowns in other countries such as Guatemala, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan have coincided with changes in big sending countries like Russia and China, which have placed more emphasis on domestic adoption and tightened restrictions for foreigners.

China, for instance, stopped allowing single woman to adopt children - up to one-third of U.S. adoptive parents fell into this category in the late 1990s, Selman says. Advances in fertility technology and the increasing number of couples turning to surrogacy have all contributed to the global drop.

The U.S., which historically has received about half of the world's annual international adoptions, saw a decline of more than 60 percent from 2004 to just over 9,000 last year.

Dilworth, the U.S. adoptions official, says the economic downturn is at least partly to blame, with foreign adoptions typically costing between \$20,000 to \$40,000.

But the U.S. freezes on adoptions from some countries also are curtailing the supply.

Guatemala used to provide up to 4,000 children a year for international adoption at its peak in 2006. But the U.S. will not accept further adoptions from the country until it has fully revamped its system to root out corruption, Dilworth says.

"They have incredible problems with fraud," she says.

In one recent high-profile case, a Guatemalan court ruled that an American family must return their 7-year-old adopted daughter to her birth mother after it was discovered that the girl was allegedly snatched from in front of her house five years ago. The child remains in the U.S.

Other countries that have seen large drops in the adoption of foreign babies include Spain and France, which fell 48 percent and 14 percent, respectively, from 2004 to 2010. Canada remained the same and Italy actually saw a 21 percent increase during that period, according to Selman, who analyzed data from 23 countries that are primary receivers of adopted orphans.

Last year's 25,000 adoptions globally were the lowest amount since 1996, Selman said.

The global numbers could decline further as South Korea, one of the top providers of orphans for foreign adoption, works to phase out its long-running program.

Since the 1950s, it has sent more than 170,000 children abroad, with the majority ending up in the United States. Despite having one of the world's fast-growing economies, and growing domestic concern about falling birth rates that are already among the world's lowest, it continues to rank as a top sending county. Experts blame this on a strong cultural stigma against both unwed Korean women who give birth and couples who adopt.

But pressure has been mounting for years for the government to abandon the program. In recent years, lawmakers have created new incentives to help promote domestic adoption, while quotas have allowed fewer children to leave.

If the decline in global adoptions is to be reversed, says Selman, the source is likely to be Africa, where Ethiopia has emerged in recent years as a top source of orphans available for foreign adoption. It's unclear whether other African countries will follow.

"If it's going to go up, it'll be from Africa," he says. "It could be that they set their pace against adoption, and that could have a profound effect."

Associated Press writers Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea, and Romina Ruiz in Guatemala City contributed to this report. Follow Margie Mason at www.twitter.com/margiemasonap

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