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Renewed US concerns about Vietnamese adoptions leave American parents in limbo

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HANOI, Vietnam (AP) - Lynn DeHart never planned to live in Vietnam -- until the U.S. government said she couldn't bring her newly adopted grandson home.

Now, she's been stuck in a Vietnamese hotel for three-months, trying to get a U.S. visa for 18-month-old Alexander.

"Good heavens, no, I can't leave without him," she said. "I couldn't live with myself. Do they really think I would return him to an orphanage?"

Renewed U.S. concern about possible baby selling, fraud and corruption -- the same fears that led to the suspension of Vietnamese adoptions from 2003 to 2005 -- are holding up visas for some babies adopted in Vietnam. Roughly 20 American families are affected, according to Vietnamese adoption officials.

"We have conveyed our concerns to the government of Vietnam, and they are assisting us in our investigations," said U.S. Ambassador Michael Michalak. "We're trying to fix the system. It's going to take time. And it's a painful situation all around."

Nguyen Cong Khanh, deputy director of Vietnam's international adoption agency, agreed that the system needs to be improved. Too many American adoption agencies have been licensed in Vietnam, and the demand for babies is greater than the supply, he said.

Vietnamese law requires that foreign adoption agencies make humanitarian contributions to orphanages. These orphanages often don't disclose what they receive or how they use it, Khanh said.

"The agencies mostly pay in cash, and it is hard to ensure that the money is used transparently and correctly," Khanh said. "This may have created fertile ground for corruption."

Families like the DeHarts, who adopted babies in line with Vietnamese law, are left with two choices: returning their babies to the orphanage or appealing the U.S. visa decision, a time-consuming and costly process with no guarantee of success.

David and Julie DeHart adopted Alexander last September and expected to take him home three weeks later. Then, U.S. immigration officials said they intended to turn down their visa request.

David, a family physician, had to get back to work in the United States. But his mother, Lynn, was willing to stay in Vietnam with her grandson while the family appealed. She never expected to be here this long.

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"It is an amazing voyage that I'm on," she said.

She has had to learn how to cross Hanoi streets, wading through a sea of motorbikes and scooters that rarely slow for pedestrians, not even for 64-year-old grandmothers pushing baby strollers.

"They go through red lights and drive on the sidewalk!" she said. "I just put up my hand and say, 'Don't hit me!'"

Every morning, she and Xander, as the boy is nicknamed, call his parents and 4-year-old brother Spencer in the U.S. Midwestern state of Wisconsin using Skype, watching each other with webcams on the free Internet service.

U.S. Embassy officials sympathize with families in the DeHarts' situation but say they have a legal responsibility to investigate adoptions thoroughly. U.S. law requires that an adopted child be a genuine orphan or be given up knowingly for adoption by his birth parents.

Because of the recent problems, immigration officials have begun conducting visa investigations before parents arrive to pick up the child.

"I wish they had been doing that all along," David DeHart said. "Unfortunately, there's a group of us who are now stuck in limbo."

Some have quit their jobs to stay in Vietnam with their babies, living off their savings while they appeal.

"My entire livelihood is at stake," said Monica DiGiacchino, 39, who has taken leave from her job to pursue a visa for her adopted 7-month-old son Patrick.

"It is absolutely anguishing," said DiGiacchino, a technical writer from Alameda, California, who shares a Hanoi apartment with a friend in the same situation. "We are first-time parents, and we are away from our support system."

Vietnam has become a popular place to adopt because the wait for babies is generally shorter than in other countries. Also, single parents are eligible to adopt here and, unlike neighboring China, Vietnam allows babies to be adopted before they turn 1 year old.

Twelve countries have adoption agreements with Vietnam, but Americans adopted more babies in 2007 than all the others combined, according to Vietnamese officials.

Last year, 826 American families adopted babies in Vietnam, including Hollywood star Angelina Jolie. In 2002, the last full year of adoptions before the suspension, Americans adopted 766 babies.

Among the other nations with adoption agreements are Canada and several European nations, including France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Sweden and Ireland.

So far, only the United States has raised public concerns about adoptions in Vietnam.

Before adoptions resumed, Vietnam agreed to set up a central authority to regulate adoptions in the country's 64 cities and provinces. But U.S. officials say that individual provinces have continued to set their own rules and adoption fees, increasing opportunities for corruption.

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With more than 40 U.S. adoption agencies operating in Vietnam, the competition for babies is intense. An adoption can cost more than US\$20,000 (euro14,000), not including travel costs.

While many agencies follow the rules, U.S. officials believe some do not.

According to the embassy Web site, some Vietnamese parents have been offered cash for their babies, and some infants have been put up for adoption without their parents' knowledge.

The embassy statement also describes a suspicious surge in reports of abandoned babies after U.S. adoptions resumed, especially in the rural provinces of Thai Nguyen and Phu Tho, where the DeHarts adopted Xander.

Many of the abandonments appear to have been staged, said a U.S. Embassy official who declined to give his name, citing embassy rules.

"They probably know where the child came from, but they are using false documents to make it difficult for anyone who is trying to figure it out," he said.

The concerns about Xander's adoption stem from a date change on his adoption papers, David DeHart said. The form said the baby had been found abandoned in 2007, but apparently someone had changed the year to 2006.

U.S. Embassy officials will not discuss specific cases, citing privacy concerns. During September and October, the first two months of the 2007 fiscal year, they raised questions about 13 adoptions.

All those families are appealing for visas.

The DeHarts say they chose their adoption agency carefully and have complete confidence in it.

Still, David DeHart said he understands why U.S. officials are subjecting adoptions to heightened scrutiny.

"They are concerned about children basically being bought and sold," he said. "That's something we obviously don't support."

Associated Press writer Vu Tien Hong in Hanoi contributed to this report.

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