

U.S. government scrutinizes Guatemalan adoptions

FOREIGN ADOPTIONS

The number of immigrant visas issued for adopted children coming to the USA and the top countries of origin:

- ◆ China (mainland): **6,493**
- ◆ Guatemala: **4,135**
- ◆ Russia: **3,706**
- ◆ Korea: **1,376**
- ◆ Ethiopia: **732**
- ◆ Kazakhstan: **587**
- ◆ Ukraine: **460**
- ◆ Liberia: **353**
- ◆ Colombia: **344**
- ◆ India: **320**

Source: U.S. Department of State
for fiscal year 2006

By [Steve Friess](#), Special for USA TODAY

The U.S. government is warning thousands of Americans who plan to adopt children from Guatemala that it suspects widespread fraud in that country's foreign adoption practices and plans to increase its scrutiny of each case.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services division, which oversees international adoptions, pointed in a memo to a case in which a baby was smuggled into the USA and cases in which fraudulent documents were used. The memo "strongly" urged parents to "carefully consider their options."

The memo all but assures people in the process of adopting that they will face new delays, immigration agency spokesman Dan Kane says.

"There are serious problems with the adoption process in Guatemala," Kane says. "The Guatemalan government is planning to implement new adoption processing procedures to increase protections, but these new procedures are not sufficient" to ensure that the child being adopted is legitimately being surrendered by the parent.

Guatemalan adoption activist Kevin Kreutner, who operates Guatadopt.com, says parents are alarmed.

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"There are a lot of really scared people right now who have entered into a legal, legitimate system in

good faith who are on a roller-coaster ride," Kreutner says. He lives in suburban Milwaukee and has adopted two Guatemalan children.

Americans adopted 4,135 Guatemalan children last year, putting the impoverished Central American nation second only to China in popularity as a source for international adoptions. Kreutner says that's partly because, until now, the process for Guatemala has been faster than elsewhere — four to seven months vs. usually a year for China. Many adoptive parents also like the fact that the children typically live in private foster homes rather than orphanages.

But Kane says he fears that Guatemala may not meet its deadline of this year to comply with an international treaty known as the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

The agreement requires countries to take extensive measures to ensure that the rights of the biological mothers are protected. Without those, federal officials say, an adoption system that has become lucrative for facilitators and Guatemalan lawyers could be permitting parents to be coerced or bribed into unwillingly relinquishing their babies.

The topic was one of many President Bush said he raised with Guatemalan President Oscar Berger during his visit last week to Guatemala City. Berger made no public statements about the matter, but Jose Guillermo Castillo, Guatemala's ambassador to the United States, said Guatemalan lawmakers are working on reform legislation that could be stalled in his country's congress.

"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.

Kreutner says the Hague, although well-meaning, requires governments to conduct investigations they don't have the staff to handle and would severely slow down the adoption process. He noted that the Guatemalan process already requires that a DNA test be taken to ascertain that the woman who gives the child up for adoption is actually the mother.

The turmoil doesn't sit well with Jason Tylenda, 32, of Huntington Woods, Mich., who is now in his 11th month of trying to adopt an 11-month-old Guatemalan girl but whose process already has been slowed down in part because the child's mother is a minor. Tylenda, who is single, has had a nursery set up since July for the girl, whom he plans to name Lilian.

"I have a room with a changing table, diapers and clothes that she's already outgrown," Tylenda says. "That my process could be affected by this is at the very least distressing. The prospect of that wait being even longer is depressing."