

Gov't to Restart International Adoptions

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Three years after the government put a halt to the country's adoption program, foreigners will again be able to adopt children from Cambodia starting Jan. 2, an official said yesterday.

Though Cambodia passed a new and widely praised adoption law in 2009 designed to prevent corruption and baby-selling, the Ministry of Social Affairs has postponed its implementation several times, stating that it needed time to work out how the law would be practiced.

"The Cambodian government's ban on international adoption is still valid until Jan. 1, 2013, as we had asked for a delay," said Oum Sophannara, director of the Ministry of Social Affairs' child welfare department. "There was more work to do in some needed documents."

When asked if foreigners will be allowed to adopt Cambodian children from Jan. 2, Mr. Sophannara replied "yes" but declined to comment further.

When the government halted all foreign adoptions in 2009 after enacting the new law, foreigners who were already in the process of adopting a child suddenly found that their applications were no longer valid. Under the law, single parents are not allowed to adopt Cambodian children. Any potential parents must also be more

Continued on page 2

Adoptions...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

than 30 years old, and between 22 to 45 years older than the adopted child.

The application process for adopting a child is also stricter under the new law and it has generally been considered as a step toward protecting children from human trafficking.

A spokeswoman for Unicef in Cambodia, who was unaware of the government's plans to lift the ban on international adoptions, said that countries should limit the number of parents applying to adopt Cambodian children to avoid overburdening the authorities here, especially considering Cambodia's vulnerability to the abduction of children and falsification of application forms.

"[T]here have been growing international efforts to ensure that

adoptions are carried out in a transparent, non-exploitative, legal manner to the benefit of the children and families concerned. In some cases, however, adoptions have not been carried out in ways that served the best interest of the children," Angelique Reid, communications officer at Unicef in Cambodia, said in an email. "Systemic weaknesses persist and enable the sale and abduction of children, coercion or manipulation of birth parents, falsification of documents and bribery."

"Limiting the number of foreign accredited bodies authorized to work in Cambodia and limiting the number of applications from prospective adoptive parents, is a good way to ensure that the number of applications received by the Cambodian Central Authority is manageable, and adapted to the number, and profile of Cambodian children in need of intercountry adoption,"

she added.

A child protection specialist at Friends International, an NGO that works with marginalized children, said that while he recognized the government's efforts to protect children who are up for adoption, solutions such as living with a relative or giving the child to local foster parents should be considered first.

"International adoption should be the second-to-last resort before a child has to be placed in long-term residential care," said Luke Gracie, manager of Friends International Partnership Program for the Protection of Children.

The adoption system in Cambodia was considered so poor that the U.S. banned its citizens from adopting Cambodian children in 2001, citing fraud and corruption as the main reasons. However, Susan Jacobs, the U.S. State Department's special advis-

er on children's issues, said in November that recent reforms on adoption in Cambodia could lead to the U.S. lifting its ban.

Contacted yesterday, Sean McIntosh, spokesman for the U.S. Embassy, said that the U.S. is monitoring Cambodia's efforts on the issue, but did not say whether American citizens would be allowed to adopt Cambodian children come January.

"The Special Advisor for Children's Issues, Ambassador Susan Jacobs, met with the host government officials in January 2012 regarding Cambodia's ability to meet obligations for conducting intercountry adoptions. The United States continues to support Cambodia's efforts to create a child welfare system and an intercountry adoption process that fulfills its obligations under the Hague Adoption Convention," Mr. McIntosh said in an email.