

Special overseas delivery;
U.S. to simplify rules on foreign adoptions

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
December 3, 2003 Wednesday, Home Edition

Copyright 2003 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
aje.com

Section: Atlanta & the World;

Length: 1364 words

Byline: RENUKA RAYASAM

Body

The Miners got an early Christmas present from the U.S. government this year. Over Thanksgiving weekend, the Alpharettans found out that they would be able to adopt a baby boy from Bulgaria.

Allison and Scott Miner started the adoption process in May. They sent in their paperwork, completed the required medical and background checks, and met with a caseworker multiple times. Even the Bulgarian government finished its end of the deal. But it took the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, formerly Immigration and Naturalization Services, five months to process the request.

For Americans like the Miners, who want to adopt children overseas, the process might soon get easier. The U.S. government is considering changes that could transform how it handles international adoptions.
Cox Washington Bureau

The number of Americans adopting foreign children has tripled in the last 10 years to more than 21,000 last year, the federal agency says. Parents spend \$15,000 to \$25,000 and take about one to three years to adopt overseas, according to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. Of the 1.6 million people adopted in the United States, 15 percent were adopted abroad, the U.S. Census Bureau says.

And the government hasn't ignored the issue. In 1994, the United States signed the Hague Convention, an international law designed to standardize adoption procedures. Congress passed a domestic law to make the convention valid three years ago and is finalizing proposed changes in adoption regulations. Public comment on the Intercountry Adoption Act regulations ends on Dec. 15.

On Nov. 23 two senators introduced legislation to make the foreign adoptions even more efficient.

"There has been more legislation around intercountry adoption in the last few years than in decades," said Susan Cox, vice president of public policy at Holt International Children's Services, an adoption agency that's been around since 1956.

A February arrival

For parents who adopt from foreign countries, every little change to make the process easier helps.

Special overseas delivery; U.S. to simplify rules on foreign adoptions

The Miners still have a long way to go to bring home their son, even with approval of the federal immigration agency. They will have to travel to Bulgaria twice. The first time, both Allison and Scott will spend a week with their child. Then there is even more waiting for the countries to make sure that the child is not one of those abducted and put up for adoption. Finally, one parent will have to go back to pick up the child.

The Miners have had their son's room ready for months, but he probably won't be occupying it until February.

Adopting a child from overseas used to be much quicker, said Cheryl Hatcher, a single mom in Marietta who had adopted two girls from China.

She started the paperwork to adopt her first daughter, Grace, in April 1995 and was on a plane to get her in September. But adopting her second daughter, Brianne, wasn't quite so fast.

"There are more steps to the process, and even more paperwork and hoops the second time," she said. She started the process in January 2001 and finally got to pick up Brianne in August 2002.

That's because the Chinese government has cracked down on baby trafficking. Orphanages must now post a notice in the local paper for three months with the baby's picture, asking, "Is this your baby?"

Caught in red tape

The issue of babies being stolen from parents and sold to agencies isn't uncommon. The idea behind the Hague Convention is to get rid of that problem.

The Hague Convention, which has been signed by 56 countries, would require every nation to establish one central authority for dealing with intercountry adoptions. That office would have to certify adoption agencies within their country, making sure they are credible.

Agencies would also have to clearly spell out their fees, what services they provide and what papers and tests they require.

Legislation introduced in the Senate on Nov. 23 would take an even bigger step of creating one U.S. agency that deals with intercountry adoptions within the State Department. Under the pending bill, Citizenship and Immigration Services would no longer be involved.

"Right now the biggest challenge agencies have is dealing with" the federal agency, said Susan Secor, executive director of One World Adoption Services. "They have really cracked down on visa applications since Sept. 11 [2001] and unfortunately adoptive parents are being caught up in the red tape."

In Georgia, it takes a minimum of three to four months for the federal agency to process applications, she said.

The bill also "would get rid of the mind-boggling paperwork and duplication of effort" that comes with the State Department and Citizenship and Immigration Services both being involved, said Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), one of the bill's co-sponsors. The bill, which won't be acted upon until Congress goes back to work next year, would also change the image of children adopted from foreign countries.

Adopted babies now are treated much like regular immigrants. U.S. law recognizes babies adopted overseas as U.S. citizens, but the reality is much different. When babies arrive with American parents, they are granted visas. Parents still have to apply to get their babies' citizenship papers, important for proof of their status, filling out additional paperwork and paying an extra \$120 fee. The process could take up to 18 months.

Citizenship and Immigration Services announced last week that it was getting rid of that requirement. Starting in January, parents will automatically get their babies' citizenship papers within 45 days of arriving in the country.

The bill, which also expands the definition of an "adoptable child," would help make sure that adopted babies are treated like babies born abroad.

Special overseas delivery; U.S. to simplify rules on foreign adoptions

"We are trying to move away from looking at [adopted babies] as immigrants," Landrieu said. "They are immigrants, but quite **special**, so it doesn't make sense to go through the regular immigration channels."

Some nations off-limits

A lot has changed since Americans started adopting children from **overseas** after World War II. Then, most of the **adoptions** were from South Korea, with many children orphaned by the Korean War. Now Americans adopt babies mostly from China and Russia.

"When **adoption** emerges from a country, it happens in a variety of ways," Cox said. Some parents want to adopt children that are of the same race as them, while others want to adopt wherever the need is greatest or where the process is easiest.

Adoption mostly occurs where it's safe to travel or where a clear process exists. China, which has a one-child-per-family policy, is experienced in dealing with international **adoptions**.

But "Muslim countries aren't open to **adoption**," Cox said. "And many African orphans have higher rates of AIDS."

Allison Miner adopted her first daughter, Melissa, domestically about 10 years ago when she was still single. When she got married, she and her husband decided to adopt from **overseas** because **rules** are more lenient about **adoption** for older parents and those who have already adopted one child. They chose Bulgaria, partly because **adoptions** from China were halted after the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome and partly because they liked the Bulgarian culture.

"It was more of a decision of the heart," Allison said.

Cheryl Hatcher decided to adopt from China when she was there for work about 13 years ago. She had several friends who tried adopting domestically, but ran into problems when the babies' birth mothers changed their mind about giving up their baby. Plus, as a single mom she figured her chances of adopting a baby from within the **United States** might be slim.

"The Lord's hand placed those children with me," Hatcher said. "With some help from the Chinese and American governments."

Renuka Rayasam's e-mail address is rreyasam@coxnews.com.

ON THE WEB

State Department: <http://travel.state.gov/adopt>

National **Adoption** Information Clearinghouse: <http://naic.acf.hhs.gov>

Citizenship and Immigration Services: www.uscis.com

Joint Council on International Children's Services: www.jcics.org

Graphic

Photo: Alpharetta resident Allison Miner already has a room decorated for the son she and husband Scott hope to bring home from Bulgaria, possibly in February. The biggest snag in their plans has been getting their paperwork through the **U.S.** immigration bureaucracy. / RICH ADDICKS / Staff; Photo: Single mom Cheryl Hatcher (right) reads with her two daughters, both adopted from China, Brianne, 2, (left) and Grace, 8 (sitting in her lap), and her

Special overseas delivery;U.S. to simplify rules on foreign adoptions

own mother, Shirley Hatcher. Hatcher decided to adopt children from China after working there. / BITA HONARVAR / Staff; Graphic: TOP **ADOPTION** COUNTRIES

The top 10 countries from which Americans adopt (fiscal year 2002):

1. China.....5,053
2. Russia.....4,939
3. Guatemala....2,219
4. South Korea..1,779
5. Ukraine.....1,106
6. Kazakhstan.....819
7. Vietnam.....766
8. India.....466
9. Colombia.....334
10. Bulgaria.....260

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: **ADOPTION** (99%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (91%); IMMIGRATION (90%); CITIZENSHIP (90%); **ADOPTION** LAW (90%); LEGISLATION (88%); PUBLIC POLICY (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); INTERNATIONAL LAW (77%); **ADOPTION** SERVICES (77%); TALKS & MEETINGS (76%); APPROVALS (75%); THANKSGIVING (73%); CHRISTMAS (73%); SINGLE PARENTS (73%); INFANTS & TODDLERS (72%); TREATIES & AGREEMENTS (65%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (57%)

Company: CITIZENSHIP&IMMIGRATION SERVICES (59%); CITIZENSHIP&IMMIGRATION SERVICES (59%); US CENSUS BUREAU (82%); US CENSUS BUREAU (82%)

Organization: US CENSUS BUREAU (82%); US CENSUS BUREAU (82%)

Geographic: **UNITED STATES** (97%); CHINA (79%); BULGARIA (78%)

Load-Date: December 3, 2003