

Urgency and caution in adopting Haitian orphans: "An ethical, professional, compassionate process"

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Alicia Swaringen of Eugene, Oregon, received heart-swelling news the morning after the deadly January 12 earthquake in Haiti: Sthainder, the four-year-old boy she planned to adopt, was safe. And then it hit her.

The adoption paperwork, amassed over three painstaking years, was in Haiti's Ministry of Interior, now rubble and dust. What, she wondered, would become of the affectionate boy she yearned to bring to Oregon?

By January 19, however, Swaringen's fears had subsided. She heard the news of plans to speed up as many as 900 U.S. adoptions that were already in progress before the quake—and to ease the way for more.

Even before the earthquake, Haiti was awash in orphans, about 380,000 according to the U.N. Children's Fund. Many had lost parents to hurricanes, floods, disease or poverty. They lived in about 200 legitimate orphanages or group homes. Other children, however, were sold through bogus orphanages.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano announced a "humanitarian parole" policy to expedite legitimate adoptions already under way. According to State Department spokespersons, several hundred Americans were in various stages of adopting Haitian children and the special "parole" has already been granted to 400 children. During fiscal year 2009, by comparison, only 330 children were adopted from Haiti.

[A couple from Frederick, Maryland, David and Christie Hubner, promised a three-year-old three years ago, was told January 20 by their agency, One World Adoption Services, that they could pick up their daughter in Florida. "As a Christian, I really believe the Lord did not cause this (earthquake)," David Hubner told the *Los Angeles*

Times, “but blessings really do come out of tragedies.”

[Government officials cautioned that the destruction in the Haitian capital and the difficulty of correctly identifying children as earthquake orphans will slow adoptions sought by new applicants.

[Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said in a news briefing in Washington January 20 that caution is advised: “We will not let red tape stand in the way of helping those in need, but we will ensure that international adoption procedures to protect children and families are followed.”]

Private agencies, such as the Oregon-based Holt International Children’s Services, are proceeding with care. “It’s incredibly important in times like this to take every precaution that an ethical, professional, compassionate process takes place,” said Susan Soon-Keum Cox, Holt’s vice president.

“There may be children that appear to be orphans, but we need to make sure there are no other family members or neighbors willing and happy to take that child into their family. We can’t rush in and assume that they’d be better off somewhere else.”

Holt International, a nonprofit Christian organization, works in 14 countries to find children safe, permanent, loving homes. It has operated in Haiti for about a decade and had 21 adoptions in progress there when the earthquake struck.

“We have to remember—adoption is a very complex, complicated procedure,” said Cox. “It needs to be preserved for times when a child has no other possibility to have a family.”

Swaringen met the child she hopes to adopt last May at Holt’s facility in Haiti. Sthainder (pronounced Sten-dare) was three, yet seemed sure that the tall, blond woman was trustworthy.

“We walked up to each other,” Swaringen said. “I sat on the ground. He leaned over, gave me a little kiss on the cheek and put his arms around me. It was so incredibly precious. He sat in my lap and hugged me for an hour . . . We bonded immediately.”

Swaringen, 48, single and a massage therapist, has long wanted to be a mother. “Things didn’t work out that way,” she said. “So adoption was an obvious solution.” Now, she said, he will be with her shortly. “I just feel really blessed that there is this little boy there for me, and I’m here for him.” *—Religion News Service*