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Poverty feeds illegal sales of babies in Cambodia

Desperate mothers see the transactions as their only hope

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BY ROBIN MCDOWELL
 ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAING KOUT, Cambodia -- The chief baby trader in a dirt-road village 90 miles from the capital waits at a pagoda to hear whether a neighbor will sell her 2-month-old twins to a family overseas.

"No?" Chea Kim says, when told the desperate woman has changed her mind about giving up her children for as little as \$20 each. "Why not?"

Although illegal baby sales may have slowed since the United States, France, the Netherlands and several other countries started suspending international adoptions from Cambodia two years ago, the practice persists in poverty-stricken villages like Laing Kout, according to an investigation by the Associated Press.

In Chea Kim's case, an orphanage catering to international adoptions approached her five years ago and told her it was willing to pay up to \$100 for newborns, so she gave them her own 3-day-old daughter.

Later, she regretted the decision. But that didn't stop her from persuading other mothers to sell their babies -- 18 in total -- claiming they had been abandoned and the birth parents were unknown. This is done to circumvent Cambodian law, which limits adoptions to abandonment or the death of a child's parents.

Others in the poor village, most of whom earn less than \$1 a day as contract laborers in rice and bean fields, recognized a good business opportunity and also started bringing babies to the WOVA Cham Chao orphanage just outside Phnom Penh, the capital.

Many of the women who gave up their newborns in Laing Kout were too poor to raise them -- receiving as little as \$20 for each child from intermediaries like Chea Kim. Some did so after being left by their husbands, out of spite or desperation, or in hope that adoptive parents or the children would send back money in years to come.

Complaints about baby sales and thefts have come to a near standstill since the United States and France -- the two largest markets for Cambodian children -- put a hold on adoptions, said Women's Affairs Minister Mu Sochua. But some villagers are still trying to cash in.

WOVA Cham Chao stopped accepting babies a few years ago, but another orphanage opened in nearby Kandal province's Kein Svay district, villagers said.

Nop Phat, a farmer, who has delivered five babies to the orphanage, rattles off the names of pregnant women in and around Laing Kout. He knows who is willing to sell a baby and who is not. He had high hopes for Soum Savy, who had twins two months ago, but she changed her mind.

"At first I was going to give them away, because I was sick and had no milk," said Soum Savy, 40, emerging from a wooden house on stilts with the babies, one weighing just 4 pounds, his skeletal legs badly deformed.

"Now that I'm feeling better, I want to keep them," said Soum Savy, who has seven other children and no idea what she and her husband will do to feed them.

Stories about selling children are not uncommon in Cambodia -- whether for adoption, prostitution, or domestic service.

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Decades of war -- bombing by the United States in the early 1970s, the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975-79 and military occupation by Vietnam in the 1980s -- have destroyed the social fabric, said Dr. Sotheara Chhim, deputy director of the Transcultural Psycho-social Organization.

Little has been done in the years that followed to rebuild institutions that traditionally foster a sense of community or build values and trust.

The most severe damage was done during the Khmer Rouge's bloody four-year reign. Maoist-inspired revolutionaries purposefully obliterated all aspects of traditional Cambodia, emptying the cities and herding people to the countryside to work as slaves in the rice fields.

As many as 2 million Cambodians, or 1 in 5, died of starvation, overwork, execution or illness.

People were taught to think only of the revolution, with the result that they learned to think only of themselves in order to survive, said Sotheara Chhim.

Even Cambodia's king has expressed concern.

"Extreme poverty among a large number of our people . . . has pushed a non-negligible number of parents to sell their children to rich foreigners," King Norodom Sihanouk, 81, wrote on his Web site in February.

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