

Child advocate warns of adoption black market

By **ALLYN FISHER-ILAN**

A black market for adoption remains active in Israel, despite the enactment of legislation three years ago to regulate the adoption of children from overseas, Dr. Yitzhak Kadman, director-general of the National Council for the Child said yesterday.

Addressing several hundred social workers, professors, and parents at a conference on adoptions at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, Kadman said that "nobody knows the numbers" of children adopted illegally, although reports surface from time to time about parents abandoning a sick child adopted abroad at a hospital.

"To the best of my knowledge, despite the enactment of the legislation several years ago, there is still a black market in Israel for adoption," said Kadman, whose organization is the country's main child advocacy group.

He urged the authorities to enforce an amendment passed by the Knesset in 1996 governing adoptions from overseas. "Now that there is a legal route for adoption [from abroad] why are there no serious efforts to enforce the law?" Kadman said. "Perhaps adults tend so much to identify with other adults that they forget there is another player at stake" — namely, the child.

The amendment, initiated in the mid-1990s by MK Anat Maor (Meretz) and Education Minister Limor Livnat (Likud), then a legislator, licenses private agencies to handle the adoption of children overseas, with the aim of cracking down on illegal adoption methods.

Since its implementation in 1998, more than 640 children have been adopted from Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Guatemala, Colombia and several other countries, according to Nehama Tal of the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry. She said the figure was double the number of infants available for adoption in Israel during the same period.

Professor Eliezer D. Jaffe, of the university's Paul Baerwald School of Social Work hailed the legislation in his lecture yesterday as having opened "a new era" in inter-country adoption services.

Previously, prospective adoptive parents waited up to six years for a child, as in 1996 there were only 74 babies available for adoption for more than 1,500 prospective adoptive parents, Jaffe said. Many who went abroad to third world countries to adopt children fell prey to

racketeering, sometimes paying their life savings to adopt what turned out to be kidnapped children. Some even landed in jail, Jaffe said.

Jaffe estimated that more than 10,000 Israelis had adopted privately from overseas during that time.

Since the recent legislation, 15 agencies or associations registered with the government assist in overseas adoptions, said Jaffe. However, he called for amending some rough spots such as permitting adoption fees to top \$20,000 when necessary. Yesterday's conference was held in honor of Jaffe's retirement. Other problems were noted in the five-year old amendment to a 1981 adoptions law.

David Ben-Nahum, an adoptive parent active in lobbying for legislative change, called for amending a clause barring the adoption of a child born in Israel to parents of a different religion than that of the would-be adoptive parents. He knows of adoptions having been barred on these grounds.

Moriah Bakshy, of the Justice Ministry's department for legislation, called for easing a three-year residency requirement for adopting a child in Israel. A participant interjected that she knew of Israeli diplomats posted abroad who had been told they were ineligible for adoption because they hadn't been in the country for three years.

Bakshy thought the law should also require insuring couples against the possibility of paying for an adoption and receiving no child.

Kadman argued that talk of such legalities made him feel "as though we are at a meeting of the association for the import of ceramics. We have to remember that we're talking about children, we too often forget." Kadman also cautioned against relying too much on private agencies and called for tighter government regulation of overseas adoptions, and for the ministry to take steps to monitor the situation of children adopted from abroad.

"We tend to privatize anything that moves," but sometimes there is no substitute for public oversight, Kadman said.

Figures show as many as 40% of adoptive parents are single mothers, who may need some support, he added. "A person has to be an angel to handle the raising of a child on one's own. As Hillary Clinton once put it, 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Do all our adoptive parents have a village behind them?"

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