Haiti slows orphan airlifts to U.S.: The Haitian government has moved to slow the flights of orphaned children to the U.S., as an infant crushed by rubble recovers in Florida.

Jan. 27--Acting on persistent fears that homeless and orphaned children will be victimized by human traffickers, the Haitian government in Port-au-Prince has put the brakes on the large-scale migration of orphans destined for adoptive families in the U.S.

Haiti’s prime minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, told The Miami Herald his government had considerable fears that children may be scooped up in the streets of Port-au-Prince by nongovernmental organizations. The government also has concerns that children may be trafficked into prostitution or slavery.

Bellerive said his country would not release children for adoption without his personal approval, and ordered nongovernmental organizations working in Port-au-Prince to stop collecting children found on the street.

“I, personally, Jean-Max Bellerive, the prime minister of the Republic of Haiti, signed three specific authorizations of adoption lists that were in the adoption process with people who are known for their services with children who are clearly identified as orphans,” Bellerive told The Herald.

As Bellerive’s order began to take effect, adoption workers, alerted by U.S. Embassy officials, scrambled over the weekend to move as many prospective adoptive children to the U.S. as possible.

LAST FLIGHTS?

A U.S. military cargo plane flew about 50 Haitian orphans to Sanford, near Orlando, at 1:30 a.m. Monday after leaders of the His Home for Children orphanage in Port-au-Prince were told such flights would likely be suspended later that day, said Chris Nungester, the orphanage director.

“We were advised to get the children out of their beds, get them dressed and load them into trucks to get them to the airport, so they could immediately be placed on the next available flight,” Nungester said. The U.S. Embassy, she said, had told her such flights were coming “to a screeching halt.”

Another large Port-au-Prince orphanage, His Glory Adoption Outreach, flew 79 orphans to Florida last week, but was forced to leave another 27 children behind, as Haitian social service workers were concerned that they had not completed their adoption paperwork.

One of the 27: 11-year-old Jhonsley, who was in the process of being adopted by His Glory’s president, Kim Harmon. Jhonsley is related to three children Harmon already has adopted, Harmon said.

“My understanding is that the [U.S.] State Department and the Haitian government are working together to come up with a process to be able to get these children qualified” to enter the U.S., Harmon said. “We must be very careful that the right children are allowed to leave.”

Adoption workers say time is the enemy, as the 168 facilities in Haiti licensed to perform adoptions will be asked to cope with perhaps hundreds of thousands of children either orphaned or abandoned after the quake.

“There is going to be a great flood into the system of children needing help,” Nungester said.

In South Florida and Sanford, meanwhile, child welfare administrators bolstered their efforts to screen adoptive parents as well, requiring last-minute criminal background checks, for example, for families whose screenings were done years ago.

“One of the things we’re concerned about is making sure all the groups that are claiming the children here are actually vetted,” said Jacqui Colyer, regional administrator for Miami-Dade and Monroe counties for the state Department of Children & Families. “We have ramped up our diligence and vigilance in looking at who these people are.”

Among the concerns of child welfare workers: ensuring that none of the arriving children end up in the hands of human traffickers, Colyer said.

The 50 children who arrived Monday spent the day at His House Children’s Home in Miami Gardens, where they were treated to a traditional Haitian dinner of black rice with mushrooms, chicken or turkey and a large sheet cake decorated with fruit in the shape of an American flag, said His House’s spokeswoman, Iris Marrero.

“Welcome to America,” the cake proclaimed.

Adoptive parents from all over the U.S. trickled in to be reunited with the children, Marrero said. Some had traveled as many as 30 hours. “The children woke up this morning and were very excited to know they would be seeing their parents very soon,” she said.

THE PAPERWORK
D.J. Cannava, a DCF lawyer, said he worked through the night Monday with workers at His House to ensure paperwork on the 50 newly arrived orphans was in proper order. The children were released to adoptive parents throughout the day Tuesday as the paperwork was completed.

Meanwhile, a severely injured infant of uncertain parentage became on Tuesday the first survivor of Haiti's Jan. 12 earthquake to enter foster care in Florida. A Miami judge ordered the baby -- who is being claimed by a family in Port-au-Prince -- into the custody of state child welfare administrators.

The baby girl, whose case was heard in court Tuesday, believed to be between 2 and 3 months old, was airlifted to Jackson Memorial Hospital on Jan. 16 after she was discovered amid rubble with a fractured skull and two crushed arms, a DCF caseworker said in court.

DCF, which has been heavily involved in the repatriation of Haitian-American families as well as the processing of adoptive children from the island, asked Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Jeri Beth Cohen to place the infant under the state's care while investigators try to determine whether she has family in Haiti.

Cohen asked the agency to look "diligently" for the girl's family, while at the same time beginning efforts to place the girl up for adoption in Miami should no family be found.

"We want to help," Cohen said in court. "We don't want to further traumatize this family. We must make sure we work very diligently to find her family. That is very, very important."

The baby girl, whose name remains unknown, is believed to be the first child brought from Haiti to enter foster care in Florida. Another child may have been sheltered by federal immigration workers last week, Colyer said.

While the infant was recovering at JMH last week, her identity a mystery, a man and woman who thought their baby daughter had died in the rubble got word that their child had been found and flown to Miami.

A journalist working for ABC News who was passing by the rescue took the baby to a field hospital in Port-au-Prince and later returned to the crumbled home to find the family.

There, a relative gave her contact information for Junior Alexis and Nadine Devilme, who believe the baby in Miami is their daughter Jenny. Alexis, 24, had searched for the baby for days after the quake, which knocked Devilme, 23, unconscious.

The couple moved to a camp in front of the Canape Vert Hospital.

Last week, they told a Miami Herald reporter that they had no proof that the baby in Miami was theirs. But Alexis said he was prepared to take any test necessary to prove fatherhood.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was contacted by officials at the hospital as well as the journalists who brought the baby to the triage center in Haiti.

Workers with the organization in Haiti have been trying to get in touch with the couple, according to the Red Cross.

Miami Herald staff writers Jacqueline Charles and Trenton Daniel in Port-au-Prince and Hannah Sampson in Fort Lauderdale contributed to this report.

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