



The Associated Press

James Maxwell embraces his children in Thailand refugee center . . . They plan to celebrate Christmas in Georgia.

Officials Fear Snag in Amerasian Entries

The Los Angeles Times

Bangkok, Thailand — A 10-week halt in the Amerasian airlift from Vietnam ended last week with the departure of 22 children, but the fledgling program might be stalled soon despite a new open-door U.S. policy.

U.S. officials and aid workers agreed that a new law aimed at easing Amerasians' entry into the United States would do little to bring in significant numbers of the children fathered by Americans during the Vietnam War.

Michael Nebeker, Thailand director of the Pennsylvania-based Pearl S. Buck Foundation, complained that Congress wrote the bill as if it were saying, "Let's make a nice gesture toward the Amerasians — but don't really let the bastards in."

The law provides only for the children and not for those who have reared or cared for them. Asian mothers or guardians must sign an irrevocable waiver of their custody rights before the children can be admitted.

Critics say it is unrealistic to expect children, some no more than 7 years old, to part willingly with loved ones in Vietnam to move to a strange land with strange customs and strange people.

Even if children were anxious to go to the United States under the new conditions, officials in Hanoi have made it clear Amerasians will not be allowed to leave alone.

"We've been given to understand from the Vietnamese that they don't intend to cooperate if the mothers are split from their children," said Donald Colin, head of a U.S. refugee program overseeing the departure of Amerasians from Vietnam.

Some refugee officials acknowledge that Vietnam may have a legitimate concern in trying to keep families together, but they warn Hanoi's motives may not be entirely pure.

"The mothers of these kids are considered to be one step above the gutter," said John Cullen, an official of the U.S. Catholic Conference who is attached to Colin's refugee program. "They want to get rid of the mothers, too."

The rules also apply to Amerasians in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and South Korea, all of which have experienced U.S. military involvement.

The Vietnamese Amerasians were the focus of the U.S. immigration reforms, perhaps as a result of reports that the children have become outcasts from society because of their ties to the American enemy.

Previously, U.S. immigration rules gave a low priority to Amerasians. Only those children who could prove they were entitled to U.S. citizenship — a task accomplished up to now by little more than 100 children — were accepted easily.

Amerasians have fled Vietnam as so-called "boat people" or have left in ones and twos along with parents approved for immigration, but it was not until this year that Vietnam allowed any of the children to leave just because they were Amerasians.

In September and October, the authorities rounded up 36 children and sent them to the United States along with mothers, grandparents and half-brothers or half-sisters.

Under the new regulation, children will be required to provide only minimum proof they were fathered by an American to gain admission to the United States.

The physical appearance of the children, many of whom have decidedly American features — blond hair, blue eyes, and, in some cases, black skin — also is taken into account, according to the law.

"We want to help kids who are entitled, but each of those kids might have a dozen relatives," Colin said. "Someplace you have to draw the line."