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Illegally adopted Filipino babies traced

By Cathy C. Yamsuan
Philippine Daily Inquirer
First Posted 01:54:00 02/01/2010

Filed Under: Children, Crime, Science (general), Family, Foreign affairs & international relations

MANILA, Philippines—Humanitarian workers using [DNA tests](#) are offering to help track down Filipino babies illegally sent to Singapore for adoption in affluent countries.

"Women posing as their mothers would go to Singapore using fake identification to make authorities believe that the babies are theirs," said Amihan Abueva, regional coordinator of the NGO Asia Against Child Trafficking.

"But once in Singapore, the babies are left behind," Abueva told a forum on "DNA-Prokids: Using DNA To Help Fight Child-Trafficking."

"The trouble is that there are no complainants," Justice Undersecretary Ricardo Blancaflor told reporters on the sidelines of the forum at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City.

"Parents also do not know where to go. They do not even know whom to accuse since no one knows where the child went," Blancaflor said.

DNA-Prokids is an international humanitarian initiative that establishes and uses the genetic identification of children taken by force in an effort to return them to their families.

Began in 2004, the effort is headed by two forensic scientists—Dr. Jose A. Lorente of the University of Granada in Spain, and Dr. Arthur J. Eisenberg, co-director of the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification.

The UP Natural Sciences Research Institute's DNA Analysis Laboratory recently joined DNA-Prokids' efforts to deter child trafficking by providing free services to families with missing children.

Lorente warned the meeting that child trafficking was now considered an international epidemic and could be "the No. 1 crime worldwide by 2010."

"Heroin, at least, can be detected. But it is very difficult to prove that the child carried by an adult is really his," he said.

No systematic method

"As long as there is no systematic method to track down parents and bring back their children to them, children [will continue to be] abducted. Guatemalan children, for example, are abducted and brought to the United States and Europe where there are markets for illegal adoption," Lorente said.

Dr. Maria Corazon de Ungria, head of the UP National Scientific Research Institute's DNA Analysis Laboratory, explained that DNA or deoxyribonucleic acid "is the blueprint of all living creatures and those once alive."

DNA tests are now commonly used to establish the paternity of a child, especially in child support cases.

According to De Ungria, a child inherits DNA properties from both the father and the mother. Y-DNA testing, which detects the male Y chromosome, establishes the father-child link.

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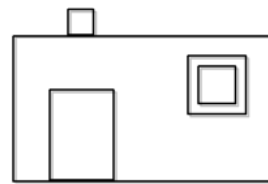
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Mitochondrial DNA that is passed on from mother to child is used to trace the mother's family or genetic lineage.

Because DNA is chemically stable, can survive over several years even after the death of an individual, and is unique to every creature, it is considered a reliable measure of genetic origin.

Right to identity

Lorente identified northern India, China and the Philippines among the Asian countries with "statistically large percentage of cases" of illegal adoptions.

This means many children from these countries end up abroad and become victims of trafficking "whether through prostitution, forced labor, militant activities or illegal adoptions."

The forum's program stated that 50 percent of the 600,000 to 800,000 people "trafficked across international borders each year are under 17 years old."

Lorente said UN studies showed that Central and South America, Africa, Central and Southeast Asia were the prime sources of children brought to North America, Canada, the United States, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

"One of the basic rights of a child is the right to identity. If a child is without documents, his identity can still be established through DNA analysis. But this requires the help of governments concerned and needs cooperation and coordination of their agencies," Lorente said.

De Ungria wants the UP DNA laboratory to work with the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking and get a sponsorship from the Department of Science and Technology "because DNA tests are admittedly expensive."

Lack of coordination

All cases of free DNA testing that the UP laboratory accepts will be financed by DNA-Prokids International provided these are done in efforts to reunite abducted children and their parents.

The UP institute indicated that DNA analysis ranged from P3,000 for the "sampling, extraction and storage of a biological sample for five years" to P60,000 for samples taken from a child and two parents for use in legal cases.

Lorente said that efforts to reunite parents and kidnapped children had been marred by the lack of coordination among government agencies in various countries.

He noted that in the Philippines, "there is a problem of processing evidence and DNA testing so DNA-Prokids International will collaborate by offering its support and finances from grants."

Lorente said DNA-Prokids International released its first batch of DNA analyses in 2005 that was used in efforts to recover children forcibly taken from Latin America, Nepal, Guatemala and India.

Index system

In Guatemala, cheek swabs taken from 23 children rescued from an illegal adoption syndicate allowed authorities to track down their families who reported that they were abducted, Lorente said.

Lorente and Eisenberg are working on a combined DNA index system, an international database of DNA profiles taken from rescued children and parents who volunteered theirs.

The scientists foresee that once a worldwide system is in place, it would be easier for authorities trying to track down missing children if DNA profiles are readily available for a possible analysis with those claiming to be their biological parents.

Eisenberg said that the sharing of such data would be limited.

"Subjects would only be known by the serial numbers provided by the laboratory. There will absolutely be no sharing of DNA-Prokids information with other agencies. We will only have an exchange of critical information and share profiles in a protected environment using only ID numbers," he explained.

"Reliability is the key. We want to provide a system that is accurate, whose interpretation is without question and that would be provided and shared at no cost," Eisenberg said.



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