

Airlifting of Babies Ordered Suspended

By Bill Richards
and Elizabeth Becker
Washington Post Staff Writers

Federal immigration officials yesterday ordered an immediate, temporary halt to the "Operation Babylift" bringing Vietnamese and Cambodian children to the United States.

The officials cited "irregularities" and legal questions arising from the transfer of the children, including 28 from Cambodia who arrived in the Washington area Monday.

Although private adoption agencies began placing those Cambodian children in temporary foster homes yesterday, Immigration and Naturalization Service officials said they were notifying government adoption agencies throughout the metropolitan area that the youngsters' adoptive status is cloudy.

"We're going to launch a full investigation to determine what these children's backgrounds are and how they got into the United States," said James Green, deputy commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. "We're going to make certain there isn't any quick adoption of



ELIZABETH HOLTZMAN
... questions officials

these children before we know who they are."

Meanwhile, officials from the District and Maryland said that without court documents relinquishing the rights and responsibilities of the parents of the Cambodian children, they wouldn't be considered adoptable in their jurisdictions.

In Virginia a child becomes adoptable either through the consent of the parents or "a pretty strong

See CHILDREN, A12, Col. 4

CHILDREN, From A1

showing that the consent is being withheld contrary to the best interests of the child," according to Fairfax County Juvenile Court Judge Richard J. Jamborsky Jr.

"Parents must have their rights and responsibilities terminated in the circuit court," said Barbara Hawk of the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services. "The question of the Cambodian children is very complicated. I honestly don't know the answer for them, and maybe nobody knows." Jurisdiction for whether children can be legally adopted is up to the state governments.

Among the irregularities cited by officials for the suspension of the flights are questions about the authenticity of many of the children's orphan status. There have also been reports that

some high Vietnamese officials paid bribes to get their children out of the country and that children leaving Cambodia were promised a U.S. education for getting onto the plane.

Officials from Immigration and the Agency for International Development said yesterday that it appears th 28 children here do not have any documents authorizing their adoption by parents or guardians.

One of the major problems, said Green, is trying to determine how the children were identified for adoption and who brought them out of Cambodia. "As far as we know," he said, "there was no one in authority on the plane when they took off."

The flight was under the direction of AID, but officials of that agency said yesterday that they were still not clear about the circumstances under which the children left Phnom Penh April 9.

"Our information, which was cabled out of Phnom Penh the day after they left, was that their parents were all dead," said Arthur Gardner, head of AID's East Asia bureau.

Gardner said that AID officials were trying to contact members of the U.S. embassy in Cambodia who fled from the country last Saturday and are now in Bangkok. He said a cable from the Cambodian embassy before it fell indicated the children had all been screened by U.S. and Cambodian officials.

The 28 children yesterday afternoon left their temporary dormitory that had been set up for them by the Red Cross at the Leesburg Presbyterian Church in Loudoun County. They held hands with adoption agency personnel and their new foster parents. They waved and laughed for a crowd of reporters and television crews

gathered in the parking lot and playground of the church.

Red Cross officials said they were all in fairly good health and had been eating a diet of rice and soy sauce prepared to make them feel at home. According to some federal officials, none of the children was being placed in foster homes where Khmer, the language of Cambodia, is spoken.

Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.), a member of the House subcommittee on immigration, questioned officials from both immigration and AID yesterday about the children's status.

She said she had requested immigration officials to photograph all the children to insure that they could be easily found if they do not qualify for adoption. "If they have parents, and there is a question about whether anyone gave permission for adoption," she said, "they'll have to be returned."

Unlike children from Vietnam who were officially designated orphans before they left Saigon and who had American parents already assigned for them, the 28 Cambodian children here arrived without release statements from their parents, according to an Immigration Service spokesman.

The Vietnamese children had parents assigned to them who were responsible for the children when they arrived. No parents had been chosen for the Cambodian children because they were not official orphans and therefore they could not be given anything but a temporary permit to stay in this country, according to the spokesman.

Immigration officials said the number of children in the United States on an emergency status for adoption is nearly up to the 2,000-child limit authorized by the U.S. Attorney General.