

Illegal Baby Trade Suspected in Kyrgyz Hospitals

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Two arrests have heightened concern that corruption and poor record-keeping may allow babies to be spirited out of hospitals for illegal adoption.

A Kyrgyz health ministry investigation into maternity hospitals around the capital has revealed holes in the system that may have been exploited to sell babies for adoption.

The health ministry set up a commission to investigate hospitals in Bishkek and the neighbouring Chu region after two staff members were arrested on suspicion of trying to sell a newborn baby.

The two, a hospital departmental head and a midwife, were arrested after an investigation conducted by the Kyrgyz police's organised crime squad. They have since been released on bail.

Kasymbek Mambetov, state secretary at the health ministry, said the case involved a baby that was taken from its mother in the maternity ward of the National Hospital.

According to Melis Turganbaev, the head of the organised crime department, said the mother was later told by medical staff that the baby was dead.

The arrests led to Turganbaev's unit receiving a number of calls from people who had been told that their newborn children had died, and who now wanted their cases to be investigated by the police.

In March, a commission set up by the health ministry seized medical documentation going back three years from all the maternity and special care units in Bishkek as well as the regional hospital in the Chu region.

The ministry announced the findings of its investigation at a press conference on March 28. Deputy health minister Madamin Karataev said there did not appear to be an organised racket selling babies, but irregularities had been uncovered in the paperwork for registering births and recording transfers of babies to orphanages.

Cases cited at the press conference included birth certificates issued for stillborn babies, and death certificates for newborns that did not record the cause of death.

Some paper trails showed babies being transferred to children's homes in Bishkek, with no record that they actually arrived. In other cases, individuals claiming to be guardians or relatives arrived at hospitals to claim children, but medical staff failed to check their identities.

As a result of the investigation, the heads of the hospitals where malpractice was identified were issued with official reprimands, and instructed to take disciplinary action against staff members found to be involved in abuses.

The ministry also decided to set up special adoption units within all maternity units, so that babies do not have to go to children's homes before they can be legally adopted.

Turganbaev said he had been urging the health ministry to investigate its staff for some months. His officers launched their own investigation after receiving tip-offs that babies were being sold by maternity hospital staff.

Some hospital staff say the pitifully low wages paid in the public healthcare sector may tempt some to consider arranging an illegal "sale".

"The average monthly wage for a doctor is 1,200 soms [35 US dollars]. Of course that's no excuse for committing a crime, but it's a factor one needs to bear in mind," said Talant Mamytov, a surgeon at a Bishkek hospital.

Medics say the social stigma of having a child outside marriage in Kyrgyzstan means that if a woman plans to give up her baby for adoption, she may be happy not to register the birth with the authorities. With no formal paperwork, the child is more vulnerable to abduction.

"If a [family's] daughter gives birth without a husband, it carries a life-long stigma, and not just the woman, but also for her parents and all of her relatives," said Maria Asanova, an obstetrician at a Bishkek maternity hospital.

Asanova noted that this happened in well-off as well as poor families –she knows of a number of cases where women from well-to-do homes have absconded from hospital after giving birth.

Gulnara Juraeva, an 18-year-old resident of the Nookan region of the Jalalabad in southern Kyrgyzstan, is facing this kind of social pressure – she is eight months pregnant and is planning to give up the child because the father has refused to acknowledge it.

"It's seen as a disgrace for a husbandless woman to have a baby... Now I am forced to give my child up to someone else. I am very worried about who my child will end up with. But I have no other choice," she said.

She said her mother is "scared of rumours and is ashamed in front of the relatives".

Jamila Kubatova, a staff member at an orphanage in Bishkek, said many of the babies which come up for adoption have mothers with a background of prostitution or drug and alcohol abuse, and this can leave the children with congenital health problems.

Prospective parents tend to want to adopt a healthy child, so many of the babies at Kubatova's orphanage will never find a home.

The shortage of healthy babies available for legal adoption could tempt prospective parents to consider trying to buy a baby. Even if they do find a child they want to adopt, going through the proper channels is

a lengthy and complicated process.

Naykei Osmonova, head of the adoption department in Bishkek's Sverdlovsk district, reeled off a list of 17 documents that prospective parents must produce in order to proceed with an adoption. Once this is in place, a special commission checks that the paperwork is in order before deciding whether to let the adoption go ahead.

Kubanychbek Aidarov and Atyrkul Imasheva encountered this bureaucracy when they tried to become the legal guardians of a newborn child they found abandoned on their doorstep early one morning. The couple had been together for nine years and were unable to have children of their own, so they were delighted at this chance to adopt a child.

"But we ran into a huge amount of problems collecting the documents together," said Aidarov.

Osmonova insists that cutting corners on the paperwork could undermine children's safety. "We need to be certain that the adopted child is going to reliable people," she said.

Aziza Turdueva is an IWPR contributor in Bishkek.

Location: [Kyrgyzstan](#)

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