Romania's policy of emptying its orphanages raises controversy

Grainger Laffan *Bucharest*

Romania claims to have removed one of the main obstacles to its entry to the European Union in 2007 after closing down a large number of its huge children's homes without resorting to overseas adoptions.

Its policy of returning abandoned youngsters to their natural families has meant that dozens of the state run institutions have closed their doors, and Romania is pledging to continue the programme, despite pressure from countries such as Israel and the United States that wanted overseas adoptions to be restarted.

The country's problems with

large numbers of unwanted children began when the then dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu decided to increase the country's population. He banned sex education, contraception, and abortion and offered financial incentives to parents to produce large families.

The national birth rate doubled as a result, but many of the children were unwanted and later abandoned, forcing the state to build institutions to house them.

Overcrowded and underfunded from the start, the orphanages worsened during the economic decline of the 1980s,

and little changed with the end of communist rule in 1989.

Rates of abandonment remained high, and the new democratic government opted for adoption as a way of decreasing the number of children in state run institutions. Images of children sent around the world after the fall of Ceauşescu created a wave of international sympathy, and large numbers of Western couples set off to Romania in the hope of "rescuing" a child.

The trade in babies flourished in the unregulated climate that developed, and private companies sprang up to meet the demand. Financial incentives encouraged Romanian parents to give their children over to institutions, where they could be offered up to the lucrative market, which in the 1990s exported an estimated 30 000 babies.

Widespread condemnation led by the European Union encouraged the government to ban international adoption in 2001 and form a national authority to protect children's rights. The authority created new laws to increase parents' responsibility in the upbringing of children and began a national policy forcing the return of abandoned children to their parents.

In the past four years Romania has closed 91 residential institutions while at the same time opening 37 centres aimed at returning children to parents.

Foster care is increasingly

used as an interim solution to avoid sending children to institutions. Of the 82 918 children in state care at the beginning of 2005, more than 50 000 are housed with foster families. However, the government continues to emphasise that parents should resume responsibility for their child, even if they are divorced or economically deprived.

Critics say the price can be high when unwanted children are forced back on destitute families.

The British aid worker Sarah Wade (pictured) has fostered a four year old autistic child, Dylan, and has been fighting the international ban on adoption to prevent the boy being returned to his alcoholic parents, who live in a ramshackle hut without electricity or running water.

"The laws are stupid and ineffective," she said. "Of course, something needs to be done to help the children here, but at the moment all the Romanian government is doing is signing forms—sending children back to their parents without looking at each individual case."

But Rupert Wolfe-Murray, an independent consultant who works on children's rights in Romania, rejects the claim, saying much is now being done to make it possible for families to keep children, including a scheme to identify and support pregnant women who are deemed at risk and more services such as day care centres.

Sarah Wade is fighting to prevent her foster son Dylan being returned to his parents

Staff at WHO HQ stop work in protest at conditions

Paul Ress *Geneva*

Between 400 and 700 staff members at the World Health Organization stopped work for an hour last week, in what the protestors saw as a demonstration about conditions, and in what the director general of the body, Dr Lee Jong-wook, called a "strike."

Dr Lee said it was "unprecedented in the history of WHO," and he threatened strikers with loss of pay and "other disciplinary measures which could

involve dismissal from WHO."

He also warned the strikers they could be replaced by transferring staff from WHO's regional offices and reminded them that "the staff association is not a union."

The tough tone of Dr Lee's memo to his Geneva headquarters staff of 2400 appears to have prevented some employees from walking off the job, while angering others.

The number who stopped work was estimated at between 600 and 700 people by the staff committee's organisers of the stoppage, while a spokesperson for WHO first estimated the number at "only 280" and then increased the figure to 400.

The stoppage appears to have been prompted by several grievances. Between 10% and

15% of WHO employees face losing their jobs. Staff say that the management is carrying out a reorganisation, in what is called a Strategic Direction and Competency Review, without any consultation with the staff. Efforts by the staff committee to meet Dr Lee to talk things over have allegedly been rebuffed. Committee members were referred to his three top advisers.

Moreover, anyone who has had four consecutive 11 month contracts, an arrangement that is common in WHO, will either have to have found a regular fixed term status or lose his or her job by July 2006. This was known as the "four years and out" policy and staff say it has created a great deal of insecurity and anxiety.

The two sides met early this week to negotiate.

A spokeswoman for WHO explained the organisation's proposed changes. "The purpose of putting a four year limit on 11 month contracts at WHO was to do away with the excessive number of such contacts."

"The four years gave management time to look at the posts involved in 11 month contracts and to decide whether they were useful or should be abolished. In other words, our aim was to regularise the system. We are discussing this right now with the staff committee."

She said that Dr Lee's letter was justified because he felt that strike action was "disproportionate to the few remaining disagreements between management and staff."