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Opinion from the director of Human Rights Watch

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By Holly Burkhalter, Washington

Criticism came from two quarters last week when Human Rights Watch reported that thousands of children in China's state-run orphanages have died from starvation, medical malpractice and abuse. The Chinese Government, of course, denied the findings and impugned the report's sources. More surprisingly, a leading association of American families with adopted Chinese children also denied the accusations and praised the Chinese orphanages.

I know how those families feel. My husband and I adopted a baby girl from China in November, and we hate the thought that she might have suffered while in state custody. We are grateful to the Chinese authorities who made the adoption possible with a minimum of waiting and hassle.

It is hard to believe that the system that produced our happy baby, Grace, is responsible for the criminal neglect and death of thousands of children ever year. But it is true. According to the report, in most of China's child-welfare institutions, at least half the children admitted die while in custody; in some, the death rate is greater than 90 percent.

Why would the Chinese Government, the world's leading source of babies for adoption, permit the abuse and death of so many children? Because it does not wish to pay for adequate care of the vast numbers of abandoned children. The Government says there are 100,000 orphans, but human rights groups say this figure is vastly understated. According to the United Nations, in 1993 more than 50,000 children were abandoned in Jiangxi Province alone.

Part of the problem is the Government's refusal to permit Chinese couples with a child to adopt another. Though adoption is not historically common in Chinese culture, the official policy of allowing couples to have only one child has left many parents yearning for more. The Government could relieve itself of the financial obligation by allowing them to adopt.

Instead, Beijing wants Westerners to take the children, and receives thousands of dollars in hard currency for each one of them. Those children selected as good candidates for adoption receive vastly better care than the handicapped, sick and unattractive children who are deemed "unadoptable."

This double standard was apparent at the orphanage in Ahui Province where our baby lived. When a group of prospective parents visited last year, the director herded them into a sparkling clean "special care" room. But one visitor reported that when he wandered into a room not on the official tour, he saw a heart-breaking scene: a room full of children sleeping on the floor while a tiny blind boy, ignored in a far corner, was weeping in his crib.

I strongly support adoption from China, and hope the program will be expanded. But Western adoption agencies must not cover up for the Chinese authorities, as one American agency did this week when it told a client that Human Rights Watch's Chinese sources exaggerated the conditions in order to improve their chances of getting political asylum in The West.

China has about 70 orphanages that compete fiercely for clients. If the West sets strong guidelines, those institutions that want to keep their foreign customers will follow them. Adoption agencies in the countries that accept most of the children -- America, Canada, Australia and Western Europe -- should insist that their representatives and Unicef monitors be given unimpeded access to every orphanage, without having to give advance notice.

Investigators should make sure that the orphanages are providing care for sick and disabled children, that medical records are kept on all children admitted, and that all deaths are reported and officially investigated.

Those of us who have been blessed with Chinese children have a duty to make China care properly for the sisters and brothers who were left behind.