PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Orphanages packed with little ones dot the landscape here, some with brightly colored signs outside their gates, others unmarked on back roads. But many of the children are

An orphanage north of Port-au-Prince that is part of Mission of Hope Haiti.

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Trying to Close Orphanages Where Many Aren’t Orphans at All

Ben Depp for The New York Times
not actually orphans, and a campaign is under way to close as many of the institutions as possible for good.

In the courtyard of one, Chris Savini, a missionary from Illinois, rocked a 10-month-old boy to sleep. The infant’s mother had died, and his father, Luxe Étienne, overwhelmed with eight children, turned over six of them to orphanages.

“He knew it was his son’s best shot,” said Mr. Savini, who arranged with the father for an American couple to adopt the baby from Mission Une Seule Famille en Jésus Christ, on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince.

Such arrangements have long been commonplace here. After the earthquake in 2010, it became clear that most children in the hundreds of orphanages in Haiti have living parents, as 40 Americans were jailed for taking custody of 33 children they said they believed to be orphans and trying to cross into the Dominican Republic with them. All the children were subsequently found to have parents living in Haiti.

Since then, a consensus has developed among government officials, children’s advocates, religious leaders and others that a new approach is required, starting with a reduction in the number of orphanages. But the transition is not easy, and some question whether the country is ready for it.

Of the roughly 30,000 children in Haitian institutions and the hundreds adopted by foreigners each year, the Haitian government estimates that 80 percent have at least one living parent.

The decision by Haitian parents to turn their children over to orphanages is motivated by dire poverty. Also, large families are common, and many parents unable to afford school fees believe that orphanages at least offer basic schooling and food.

On a recent visit to the orphanage caring for three of his children, Mr. Étienne said he struggled to make a living as a contractor and could barely support his two children who remained at home. Their private school fees, the equivalent of $237 per year, add to his burden.
“If I had enough income, I would have taken them back home,” he said, holding his cooing son.

Under rules put in place last month to comply with the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoptions, the Haitian government intends to play a larger role in regulating adoptions. In cases involving children who are not orphans, the government intends to meet with the birth parents at the beginning of the process to obtain their consent and offer assistance like job training if they want their children to stay with them.

“We don’t want poverty to be the only motivation,” said Arielle Jeanty Villedrouin, who took charge of Haiti’s child welfare services last year. “For many cases in the past, that was the only motivation.”

To reduce the number of orphanages, the government has also begun inspecting institutions here in the capital and in the far-flung provinces and trying to close those in the worst shape and reunite as many children as possible with their families. A vast majority of the orphanages are unauthorized, and only 112 are accredited. Before this year, the government did not even have a count of the institutions.

Mission Une Seule Famille en Jésus Christ, where Mr. Étienne’s son awaits adoption, opened in 2005, but its director, Joseph Kesnel, said he picked up an application for accreditation only in October. Inspectors had not yet visited the orphanage, but there were troubling signs, including children complaining of not having enough to eat, a smell of urine and a baby without a diaper in the dirt courtyard.

With a team of 160 inspectors, financed in part by Unicef, the government has reviewed 725 orphanages and has found 72 to be of such poor quality that they should close. But actually shuttering them is another matter. Since September 2011, only 26 have been closed.

When one orphanage, Soeurs Rédemptrices de Nazareth, in the hills outside Port-au-Prince, was closed in June, 3 of the 64 children had to be hospitalized because of malnourishment, officials said, and others showed signs of rat bites and scabies. The director, Sister Dona Bélizaire, has been jailed on suspicion of child trafficking. Her backers have started an Internet campaign asserting that she is being held without cause.

The closings, though, have halted, because there are so few authorized orphanages that can take in children while the government tracks down their families, said Mrs. Villedrouin, the child welfare official.

Emily Brennan reported with the help of a grant from the International Reporting Project.