

## **Protesters vow to keep Elian in U.S.**

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### **Body**

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Tens of thousands of people bearing candles and flags formed a human cross in Miami's Little Havana district, calling for young **Elian** Gonzalez to remain in the **United States**, even as Cuban leader Fidel Castro said **Elian's** father can come to the **United States** to claim him.

"The passports are ready, and of course the airplane is ready," Castro said in a television broadcast.

Meanwhile, in her weekly news conference today, **U.S.** Attorney General Janet Reno appealed for calm amid the growing tensions in the city's Cuban-American community. She reiterated that the Clinton administration would try to be patient amid the clamor. But Reno also said she was prepared to enforce the law the day after demonstrators talked of forming a human chain to prevent **Elian's** return.

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"The federal authorities of INS need to understand that we are free and this is a country of laws and we are not going to accept their stubbornness. We are not going to allow them to take the kid," said Oscar Pupo, 56, a Cuban-born **U.S.** citizen and trucker.

Negotiations between **U.S.** immigration officials and **Elian's** Miami relatives remained at an impasse. Further talks were scheduled for today.

**U.S.** Immigration and Naturalization Service officials ended a tense five-hour meeting Wednesday night with **Elian's** great-uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez, who has cared for the 6-year-old boy since he was rescued at sea in November. The meeting centered on an INS demand that Gonzalez pledge to turn **Elian** over for return to Cuba if the family loses its court fight to **keep** him in the **United States**.

Immigration officials emerged from their Miami offices about 9 p.m., saying the meeting had reached no conclusion. They postponed until Friday a deadline for revoking **Elian's** parole, which could mean he might soon be taken away from his Miami family, perhaps for a return to Cuba.

Wednesday, more than 100 **protesters** milled outside Lazaro Gonzalez's home, chanting, praying and **vowing** to form a human chain to **keep** the boy here.

"We are here to show the world that we're united and that we're not going to allow **Elian** to go back to Cuba," said Hortensia Prado, one of the **protesters**.

In an apparent prelude to what might come if the government moves to take the boy, a convoy of dump trucks chugged down the narrow streets of the neighborhood, horns blaring to the cheers of the **protesters**. The drivers **vowed** to block all streets leading to the home.

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And local officials lashed out at Attorney General Janet Reno and President Clinton, warning that Miami's Cuban exiles may burst into angry protest if Elian is removed before his court appeals are exhausted.

"They're provoking the community," Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas said of Clinton and Reno. "They keep pushing and pushing the envelope and when it explodes, no one is going to be able to control it."

At a noon press conference, Penelas and 20 other local officials vowed that local police would make no effort to assist federal officers should they try to remove the boy before his court case is finished. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush also issued a statement saying no state officers would assist, either.

After critics said the mayor was essentially inviting the community to protest, Penelas issued another statement saying police would not tolerate disruptions in the streets, such as the ones that erupted in January after the initial decision by federal officials that Elian should go back to Cuba.

Clinton responded to the comments at a Washington news conference by saying, "I like the mayor very much but I believe in the rule of law."

Reno said the federal government could have moved by now to take custody of the boy, but has practiced a patient, cautious approach.

"Nothing, no court order, prevented us from doing so," she said. "The relatives had their day in court and we gave them an opportunity to file. A federal district court judge in Miami heard their case and affirmed our decision."

During a live television broadcast late Wednesday, Castro said he would allow Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, to come to the United States along with some of his son's school classmates and a team of psychologists to live with the boy until the court battle over his fate ends.

The entourage would stay in Washington, at a Cuban diplomatic mission. They would not go to Miami.

The attorney general declined to discuss what officials would do if the boy's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, travels to the United States.

"I don't deal in what-ifs," she told reporters. State Department officials said Wednesday that they had not received a visa request from the boy's father.

Although Miami appeared on the brink of some sort of outburst, immigration officials repeated Wednesday that even if they revoke Elian's parole, they do not plan to immediately go to Lazaro Gonzalez's home and forcibly remove the boy.

"The obligation is on them," INS Commissioner Doris Meissner said in a television interview. "They have said they intend to be law-abiding, and we are relying on them to be law-abiding."

Elian has been at the center of an international tug of war since he was found floating in an inner tube off Fort Lauderdale on Thanksgiving Day. His mother and 10 other people drowned when their boat sank after fleeing Cuba.

Immigration officials immediately placed the boy in the home of his great-uncle, but in January, federal authorities ruled that Elian should be returned to his father.

The Miami family then filed a challenge in federal court and requested an asylum hearing for the boy. Last week a Miami federal judge ruled against them. The family then appealed to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, which on Monday set oral arguments for May 8.

Underscoring the growing drama was the volatility of Miami's exile community, where Elian has become a symbol of the seemingly endless battle against Castro.

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