

U.S. GRANTS VISAS IN ELIAN CASE HIS FATHER AND FIVE OTHERS COULD ARRIVE SOON. TALKS CONTINUED ON CUSTODY.

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Body

The State Department yesterday approved visas for members of Elían Gonzalez's Cuban family - setting the stage for a reunion between the 6-year-old and his father and a showdown between immigration officials and those who believe he should remain in the United States.

Six visas - to Elían's father, stepmother, baby half-brother, and a male cousin, plus his kindergarten teacher and pediatrician - could be issued as soon as today. Word of their granting came only hours after immigration officials and lawyers for Elían's Miami relatives began discussing how, not if, the boy will be turned over to his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, when he comes to reclaim him.

Those discussions lasted nearly nine hours yesterday before recessing. An attorney for the relatives said the talks would continue today.

For the better part of a week, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had been negotiating with those relatives over how Elían would be surrendered if they lost a pending court appeal. The INS had said that if no agreement is reached, it would revoke at 9 a.m. today the special "discretionary parole" that has allowed the boy to remain with them.

Yesterday's shift marked a significant change in both the tenor of those talks and the prospect that some resolution of the protracted dispute is imminent.

"The issue has shifted from revocation of Elían's parole to the issue of transferring him to Juan Miguel's custody, effective as soon as Juan Miguel gets to the United States," a Justice Department official told the Associated Press. "Tuesday's deadline has been superseded by this change of issues."

Although the State Department said it had granted visas to Elían's immediate family, it was unclear when they would arrive or where they might go - to the Gonzalez home in Florida or to the residence of Cuban officials in Washington.

The State Department did not say when it would rule on 22 other visa applications that officials said were filed on behalf of Elían's schoolmates and others, including Ricardo Alarcon, a top aide to President Fidel Castro. State

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Department spokesman James P. Rubin said U.S. diplomats in Havana would question Cuba's s government about those requests to determine their merits.

Outside the Little Havana home where Eliau has stayed since being rescued from the Florida Straits last Thanksgiving, after his mother and 10 others drowned, members of the influential Cuban American community who conduct round-the-clock vigils hinted at a fresh wave of civil disobedience if authorities try to take Eliau from his Miami relatives.

"This is a critical moment for the boy," said Ramon Saul Sanchez, leader of the Cuban American activist group Democracia. "We hope the government will be sensitive to the issues in this case . . . and we are here to make sure that they respect the rights of Eliau Gonzalez."

Demonstrators said they were willing to go to any ends to ensure that the child is allowed to stay.

"He's going back to hell," demonstrator Rita Olivo, 32, said as word of the change made its way through the crowd. "And we're not going to take it. . . . We're going to fight."

"I can't believe it, it's a disaster," sobbed Sacha Sanchez, who is outside Eliau's house practically every day and is as well-known for her towering beehive hairdo as for her scratchy electronic megaphone. "We're going to stay here. We want to be here for him."

Late yesterday afternoon, demonstrators linked arms and practiced forming a human chain in front of Eliau's house that would block INS officials or anyone else from going into the house to claim the boy.

Meanwhile, Eliau played in his backyard with Donato Dalrymple, one of two fishermen who pulled him from the ocean Nov. 25.

Dalrymple said the Miami relatives had taken the news of the change in negotiations hard.

"Lazaro" - Eliau's great-uncle - "came in the house with a bottle of Advil. He's had a headache for two months. And Mary" - Marisleyxis Gonzalez, a cousin who has become a surrogate mother of sorts - "she hasn't come out of her room all day."

While Dalrymple spoke, the demonstrators marched back and forth - some lying down in the street - continuing to practice in case the authorities come to take Eliau.

At the very end of the chain stood Sacha Sanchez, whose tears were replaced by anger and defiance.

"Come here and get Eliau, Immigration Department," she yelled at no one in particular. "Come here and get him."

Graphic

PHOTO;

PHOTO

In Havana, a youngster places Cuban flags on chairs at a new park in front of the U.S. Special Interests Section. Juan Miguel Gonzalez joined President Fidel Castro yesterday in an inauguration rally for the "anti-imperialist" park. (JOHN MOORE, Associated Press)

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