

GRANDMOTHERS FLY TO NY, APPEAL FOR CUBAN BOY'S RETURN

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Body

* Attorney General Janet Reno will meet with the women today. It is unclear how long they plan to stay in the United States.

Elian Gonzalez's grandmothers flew to New York from Cuba on Friday to appeal for his return, saying the boy's late mother will not "rest in peace" until the 6-year-old is back in his homeland.

"Respect the memory of my daughter," said the boy's maternal grandmother, Raquel Rodriguez.

She and the boy's paternal grandmother, Mariela Quintana, flew with a church delegation that has supported Elian's return over the objections of Cuban immigrants and the boy's relatives in Miami.

Those relatives have invited the grandmothers to visit. But at least for now, the women have chosen to avoid Miami, where Cuban immigrants staged massive protests after the Immigration and Naturalization Service said Elian must go back to Cuba.

Instead, the women took their message to the nation's media capital. Today they were to meet with Attorney General Janet Reno, who has said Elian belongs with his father. U.S. officials said the grandmothers requested the meeting and that President Bill Clinton's administration wants to hear what they have to say.

It was not immediately clear how long the women will stay in the United States; people who organized the trip said it will be only a few days.

Elian was found clinging to an inner tube off the coast of Florida on Nov. 25 after the boat on which he was heading for the United States capsized, killing his mother and 10 other people.

He has been living with relatives in Miami, who say he would have a better life in the United States. They are challenging a government ruling that he must go back.

"I know that many say that it was Elian's mother's will that the child remain here," Rodriguez said in Spanish. "I speak for her because I was her mother. I know what she thought and how she acted."

The mother's boyfriend arranged the journey, and Rodriguez said Elian's mother went along only because she was forced to by "the man she was with," who she said was violent and threatened her.

"I ask and beg those who are interested in helping us, to do everything possible so that the child will be handed over to us, his grandmothers, so that my daughter may rest in peace," Rodriguez said.

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The two women, greeted by a small party of customs officials and police, winced as they endured a whipping wind and 16-degree cold for their short walk into a terminal at Kennedy Airport.

"I came here to tell you all and to ask you to finish this tragedy that has been so hard for us as a family, and to ask you that our grandson can return as soon as possible," Quintana said. "Nobody has a right to make him an American citizen. He was born in Cuba. He is a Cuban."

Quintana also said that Elian, in telephone conversations with her and with his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, had expressed a desire to return to Cuba. The boy's Miami relatives claim the boy has said he wants to remain in the United States.

"We stand by our position," Elian's great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez said in Miami after the grandmothers arrived in New York. "Now that they are here in the United States, I invite them to come to my house so they can see the child - to see that we are not hiding him."

"We never talk bad about the family in Cuba to the child. Not about the grandparents and not about the father."

The Miami relatives' lead attorney, Spencer Eig, said he was not impressed by the grandmothers' emotional appeal. Eig said the women's information about the case came almost entirely from Cuba's communist government.

"We're concerned that they're being taken advantage of to some degree," Eig said. "If they got a chance to see how well he is doing, it might relieve all their anxiety."

The Immigration and Naturalization Service has ordered Elian returned to his father. But attorneys for the family in Florida have asked a federal judge to prevent his return before he has an asylum hearing.

Most legal experts predict the federal courts will uphold the INS decision to return Elian. So an act of Congress granting Elian citizenship or permanent residency is the most likely avenue for keeping the boy in the country, because it would remove him from the jurisdiction of immigration authorities.

A senator from Florida is sponsoring legislation that would give Elian U.S. citizenship. The bill by Republican Sen. Connie Mack will be filed Monday and could come up for a vote as soon as Wednesday, said Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss.

"It will be a custody issue, not an immigration issue, and that's the only intent," Lott said during an interview for "John McLaughlin's One on One" to be aired Sunday on PBS. "It would not allow the administration to blow back and forth depending on what (Cuban President Fidel) Castro says, but it would allow the courts to determine custody."

In the House, companion legislation will be introduced by Rep. Bill McCollum, R-Fla., among others. Majority Leader Rep. Dick Armey, R-Texas, said House GOP leaders had made no decision on how swiftly to push for passage.

Also Friday, the federal judge who was to hear the suit by the boy's Miami relatives withdrew from the case.

Judge James Lawrence King's son, Miami-Dade County Judge Lawrence B. King, once hired Armando Gutierrez - a man now working as spokesman for the boy's relatives in Miami - to help in his re-election bid. The federal judge also has a daughter who is a federal prosecutor in Miami.

The case was reassigned to Judge William M. Hoeveler, who presided over the trial of Manuel Noriega and declared the ex-Panamanian dictator a prisoner of war.

Graphic

GRANDMOTHERS FLY TO NY, APPEAL FOR CUBAN BOY'S RETURN

PHOTO Color Photo from THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - Mariela Quintana (left) and Raquel Rodriguez, the grandmothers of 6-year-old Elian Gonzalez, meet the press Friday in New York. The boy's relatives have invited them to visit Miami for a reunion.

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