

Dad awaits visa to come for Elian

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Body

The Cuban government, however, says the 30 other members of its group must be allowed into the U.S. too.

Cuban leader Fidel Castro calls it "the perfect formula."

Bring **Elian** Gonzalez's father to the United States, along with a bunch of his former pupils and teachers - even his old school desk.

Anti-Castro exiles in Miami say Cuba's 73-year-old president is bluffing. But a statement Thursday night from the Cuban government says each person in the 31-member entourage is "indispensable for the reinsertion of the child in his family and social environment."

VILLAGE

With another deadline postponed in the custody dispute over **Elian**, attention shifted Thursday to Cuba, where Castro said Juan Miguel Gonzalez was ready to travel to the United States to claim his son.

Federal officials failed for a second day to reach an agreement with **Elian**'s Miami relatives over custody terms. Talks are scheduled to resume Monday, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service agreed to postpone any final decision until Tuesday.

In another development, Vice President Al Gore broke with the Clinton administration and backed legislation in Congress that would grant permanent resident status to **Elian**. The Smith-Graham bill would give permanent residency to **Elian**, his father, stepmother and their child, as well as **Elian**'s two grandmothers and one grandfather. It would change **Elian**'s immigration status so his fate could be determined by a family court in Miami-Dade County. It would allow the family to live in the United States, but it would also allow them to return to Cuba if they wanted.

Gore's rival, Republican George W. Bush, said he supports similar legislation. The failure so far of the Miami negotiations leaves Washington with few alternatives.

The Miami relatives have defied the Justice Department and a federal judge by refusing to relinquish custody of the boy. The family argues **Elian** would suffer "irreparable harm" if he is forced to grow up under communist rule.

Despite a political tongue-lashing by politicians from Miami to Washington, Attorney General Janet Reno held her ground Thursday.

"This case has been heartbreaking for everybody involved, but we believe the law is clear," she told reporters. "The father must speak for the little boy because the sacred bond between parent and child must be recognized and honored, and **Elian** should be reunited with his father."

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Although experts still considered the father's visit to be a long shot, U.S. officials appeared to be giving serious consideration to Castro's plan.

"We believe his presence in the United States can be helpful to a successful resolution of the case," said State Department spokesman James Foley.

The father's high-powered Washington lawyer, Gregory Craig, warned the plan could collapse if the Clinton administration failed to provide assurances that custody would be taken away from Elian's Miami relatives.

"I'm not sure the government is in any position to do that," said Wayne Smith, a Cuba expert at the Washington-based Center for International Policy. "We may be right back where we started."

Even so, Craig announced Thursday he was going ahead with formal visa applications for Juan Miguel Gonzalez and other family members.

"When we have received assurances that Juan Miguel will be able to take custody of his son, we will also be seeking permission for a support group of Elian's classmates, teachers and doctors to come to the United States to help smooth the transition," Craig said.

Cuban exiles in Miami said they would welcome Elian's father if he came, although most are highly skeptical that he will ever make the trip.

Jorge Mas Santos, head of the powerful Cuban American National Foundation, said he doubted Castro would risk letting the family leave the island for fear they would defect:

"Castro will not under any circumstances let the family come here."

Miami-Dade County's Cuban-American mayor, Alex Penelas, dismissed the plan as a Castro ploy, adding that Elian's father should have come immediately after the boy's dramatic sea rescue last November.

Why Elian's father has delayed coming to claim his son for so long is a question asked by many exiles. Gonzalez has not been seen in Havana for several days and has made no public comment about the trip. But Cuban officials say the decision was based on the strong belief that the court case was now all but won.

The head of the Cuban diplomatic mission in Washington, Fernando Remirez, visited the State Department on Thursday to deliver a copy of Castro's speech Wednesday night outlining the proposal.

In it Castro lays out a plan to bring the nucleus of Elian's Cuban family to Washington. Juan Miguel Gonzalez would be accompanied by his new wife and Elian's 6-month-old half brother.

Calling it the "perfect formula" for Elian's "readaptation" to his old life in Cuba, Castro said the team was ready to leave immediately for Washington.

To re-create Elian's familiar surroundings, Castro also suggested sending 12 of Elian's former classmates from his hometown of Cardenas, as well as three teachers, three psychologists, two child psychiatrists, four doctors and two nurses.

If need be, his empty school desk could also be shipped over.

"We are offering to carry Cardenas to Washington, symbolically that is," Castro said. "If Mohammed won't come to the mountain, the mountain will go to Mohammed."

Castro said the group would be housed at the official Washington residence of Remirez, Cuba's senior diplomat, and a minischool and minihospital would be created for Elian while he awaited a final appeals court ruling.

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"The residence would be their school and living quarters," he said. "These would be perfectly ideal conditions that the child does not have where he is now (Miami), surrounded by rogues, noise, cameras and disgraceful situations."

If the appeals dragged on longer than a month, the Cuban leader suggested the children could take advantage of Washington's tourist sites.

Experts say many hurdles need to be overcome. The U.S. government has always said it would grant an entry visa to Elian's father, but it was unclear if Washington would approve the whole group.

But the presence of Elian's father in the United States potentially creates an option previously not available to INS officials. Elian's Miami relatives have repeatedly stated that they would be prepared to hand the boy over directly only to his father.

In an interview with one Miami TV station, Elian's 22-year-old cousin, Marisleysis Gonzalez, who shares her bedroom with the boy and has become his surrogate mother over the last four months, said she would welcome the father in her home. She even offered to give up her room and sleep on the couch if he wished to stay with them.

News of the father's possible visit spread through Miami's Little Havana district. Outside the home of Elian's relatives, protesters scoffed at the plan and at Washington for letting Castro play the ringmaster.

"I don't believe in violence in any way, and but I will do whatever it takes to protect Elian," said Otto Milian, a schoolteacher near Havana before he fled to Miami in 1962. "If you could only see him. He's an angel. An angel."

About 5:30 p.m. as dozens of supporters chanted "Liberty" and "Elian will not go," Elian finally scampered out the front door of his uncle's house and tore about the front yard, grabbing at the corner of the large American flag flapping in the wind by the front walk.

He also met briefly with Miami Mayor Joe Corollo, who told Elian he was proud of him and gave him an official city of Miami lapel pin.

Corollo spoke to Elian's uncles and said the family was glad that negotiations will continue, but the strain on them - and the city - is showing.

"They are under tremendous pressure. It's been a roller-coaster," he said.

- Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

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Graphic

COLOR PHOTO, Agence France-Presse; COLOR PHOTO, JOHN PENDYGRAFT; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Associated Press; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; Juan Miguel Gonzalez; Elian and his great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez chat in their front yard on Thursday evening.; Hanser Muniz Pedroso, Elian Gonzalez's best friend, sits Thursday next to Elian's empty chair, which reads, "This chair is untouchable," in his first-grade classroom in Cardenas, Cuba.; Fidel Castro

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