

ELIAN'S GRANDMOTHERS MEET WITH RENO THEY URGED HIS RETURN TO CUBA. THE ATTORNEY GENERAL WAS SUPPORTIVE BUT SAID IT WAS NOW FOR THE COURTS TO DECIDE.

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Body

In the latest episode in an impassioned international custody battle, both grandmothers of 6-year-old Elian Gonzalez yesterday implored Attorney General Janet Reno to help them take the boy back to Cuba.

"We ask that you return Elian to his immediate family and not to his distant family," Mariela Quintana Garrido and Raquel Rodriguez Rodriguez said in a letter to Reno. The letter was released after they met for about an hour with Reno and Doris Meissner, commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The grandmothers said it was important to restore Elian "to the normality of life with his father, brother, family, friends at schools, his toys, dog and parrot."

Reno "listened to us, she was very friendly . . . but she didn't say anything" to make the women optimistic that Elian would soon be home, Rodriguez told the Washington Post during the flight back to New York.

Reno, who has supported Elian's return, said in a written statement that the grandmothers "made a very compassionate and heartfelt plea" but that the matter now is in federal court.

"We maintain that the law recognizes the unique relationship between parent and child and that family reunification has long been a cornerstone" of U.S. immigration law as well as INS practice, she said.

HIS MOTHER DROWNED

The boy's mother, Elisabet Brotons, drowned with 10 others after a boat smuggling them from Cuba to the United States capsized. Elian was fished out of the waters off South Florida on Thanksgiving Day and has been staying with relatives in Miami.

The Justice Department and INS have said that the child belongs in Cuba with his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, but the Miami relatives have filed suit in federal and Florida state courts to block his repatriation.

"We are grateful to you for affirming Juan Miguel's paternity rights," the grandmothers said in the letter to Reno, "but we have felt frustrated over delays in complying with this right."

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In comments to the Post, Rodriguez, mother of Elisabet, dismissed as "the biggest lie I ever heard" the theory that Elisabet and Elian were fleeing persecution from Cuban President Fidel Castro and, therefore, the boy should stay in the United States. The man her daughter lived with "was a violent person" whom her daughter feared, and he forced her to leave Cuba with him, she said. Her daughter was an active communist, she told the Post.

No plans have been announced for the women to visit the boy, or to return home. But the grandmothers wrote in their letter: "We only have Sunday to see Elian, and we not only want to see him, but we also want to return with him to Cuba."

Although the grandmothers have said they would never go to Miami, Rodriguez said yesterday that she was not sure. "It depends on the circumstances. I would have to think about it," the Post reported.

MIAMI RELATIVES AWAIT THEM

The Miami relatives insist that the women must travel to Miami to visit Elian, said Armando Gutierrez, a family spokesman.

"The doors are open, and the welcome mats are out," Gutierrez said yesterday. "The family would love for them to come here to Miami. In fact, they are surprised they went to New York and Washington and have not come here."

Elian's relatives in Miami say that the grandmothers and the father are being manipulated by Castro. The relatives have found powerful allies among anti-Castro congressional conservatives. Florida Republicans have said they plan to introduce legislation in Congress tomorrow to grant U.S. citizenship to Elian.

Rodriguez denied that the women were being pressured by the Cuban government. "We speak freely. We are not under pressure, and what we say is the truth," she told the Post.

Mariela Gonzalez, whose son is Elian's father, said the boy has told her that "he is crazy with longing to come back to Cuba." Elian cries when he speaks to his father, she told the Post.

As for why Elian's father hasn't rushed to his side in Miami - Mariela Gonzalez says only "they would kill him."

"There are lots of good Cubans and lots of good Americans," she explains, "but there are lots of bad Cubans there."

Besides, she said, "I am here, the grandmother, I am here for him," the Post reported.

Rodriguez said she doesn't know how President Clinton "can permit this."

"It looks like there is not the political courage," she says, to enforce the Immigration and Naturalization Service's ruling that family members keeping the child in Miami return him to his Cuban father. Clinton has said he supports the INS decision.

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the U.S. National Council of Churches, which arranged the women's trip to the United States, and a former Democratic House member from Delaware County, said the grandmothers "shared with the attorney general their pain in the loss of this grandchild. Both grandmothers articulated as clearly as anyone could the hunger and passion that they have to return their grandchild to Cuba."

Edgar told reporters that the meeting was intended "to open the dialogue and the conversation" with Reno. "The grandmothers had a wonderful opportunity to speak to them, and that's really all that I can say at this time." He said Reno "showed enormous compassion for these two courageous women. There was a long opportunity where they simply talked back and forth with each other. It was a very personal meeting."

* This article contains information from Inquirer wire services.

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