

Another immigration case rocks Miami;
Haitians cheer family's reunion in U.S., but claim;

INS favors Cubans

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Body

He's on the cover of Time magazine. Presidential candidates have weighed in on his ***case***. Television cameras have tracked his every move for the past two weeks.

But 6-year-old Cuban rafter Elian Gonzalez isn't the only heart-rending ***immigration*** story in ***Miami*** sparking protests and controversy.
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Thousands of angry ***Haitians*** marched on the ***Immigration*** and Naturalization Service regional office in ***Miami*** this week, protesting what they charged was the unfair treatment of a pregnant Haitian woman separated from her children when a rickety boat carrying 400 people from the impoverished island was intercepted off ***Miami*** on New Year's Day.

The children were sent back to Haiti with most of the other people on the boat, while the mother, Yvena Rhinvil, 33, was taken to ***Miami*** because she was ill.

Immigration officials announced late Thursday they will allow the children to join their mother in the ***United States*** while she awaits an asylum hearing she hopes will allow her to stay permanently in this country. The children had been staying with an aunt in Haiti.

"This is great news," Cheryl Little, director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, told reporters. "These children should have been with their mother all along."

Haitians celebrated the news, but the ***case*** points out the touchy relations among South Florida's diverse population of immigrants and refugees.

For years, many ***Haitians*** here have charged that ***Cubans*** receive preferential treatment when they reach this country and that the disparity is racially motivated. ***Immigration*** officials firmly deny the charge.

The Haitian protest came just as the national furor over Elian reached a peak.

In the latest development Friday in Havana, rows upon rows of Cuban mothers --- hundreds visibly pregnant --- marched along a seaside boulevard demanding Elian's return. Cuban authorities estimated that 100,000 women participated in the "March of the Combatant Mothers."

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Friday was the U.S. government's original deadline for Elian to be returned to his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez. But Attorney General Janet Reno lifted the deadline to give Elian's relatives in Miami a chance to fight for the boy in federal court.

While the case of the Cuban boy, who survived a boat trip from Cuba that left his mother and nine others dead, sparked a national debate in the United States over whether he should be sent back to his father in Cuba, the episode involving the Haitians drew little attention outside South Florida.

On Wednesday, thousands of Haitians marched peacefully through Miami's Little Haiti district. Many held signs saying "Stop Racism," while others carried black coffins to represent people who have died on the seas or in Haiti after they were sent back there by U.S. officials.

Rhinvil and two of her children were on a packed, 60-foot boat run by smugglers who reportedly charged thousands of dollars per person. They tried to reach U.S. shores during the New Year's holiday, hoping that the celebrations would divert attention from their attempted landing.

Passengers later told reporters they spent three days at sea under appalling conditions. Several people died, they said.

U.S. Coast Guard officials stopped the boat and four women who were ill --- including Rhinvil --- were brought ashore. The rest were taken back to Haiti, including Rhinvil's children, Marc Dieubon, 10, and Germanie Dieubon, 8.

Coast Guard officials said they didn't realize they had separated Rhinvil from her children.

While granting Rhinvil's children temporary parole so they can join their mother, INS officials insisted their policies are not discriminatory and are based on laws passed by Congress.

"There is no difference whatsoever in INS policies and practices," said INS spokesman Russ Bergeron. "If there is any disparity at all, it's a product of an act of Congress called the Cuban Adjustment Act."

That 1966 law, a product of the Cold War, allows Cubans to apply for permanent immigrant status if their asylum claim is not acted upon within a year and a day.

Many Haitians in Miami feel Cubans have an easier time getting asylum because their country is controlled by a Communist dictator, while most Haitians are sent back home because U.S. officials determine they are fleeing the extreme poverty of a democratic country, not political persecution.

For now, though, Haitians are celebrating what they feel is an all-too-rare victory in the immigration arena.

"This decision ends a frightening episode and addresses a major wrong that was done to this mother and her young children," said U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek (D-Fla.), who led efforts to reunite Rhinvil and her children.

Graphic

Photo

Yvena Rhinvil celebrates in Miami on Friday after learning her two children can join her in the United States. / SAM DEAN / Associated Press

Photo

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Elian Gonzalez's two grandmothers, Mariela Quintana (left) and Raquel Rodriguez (right), lead a protest Friday in Havana. / JOSE GOITIA / Associated Press

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