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FROM PAGE ONE

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Reno: Let Elián 'get on with his life'

Legal process should move ahead, she says

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WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

WASHINGTON — Speaking in unusually personal terms, Attorney General Janet Reno implored the Florida family of Elián González on Thursday to allow a swift resolution of the custody confrontation to spare the boy further trauma.

"I think when it comes right down to it, my hope is that people will look at this little boy and get him into a situation where he can live a normal life without television cameras and the world in his face," Reno told reporters at the Justice Department. "Can you imagine if you were 6 years old and all this was happening to you?"

Let the legal process unfold in federal court without delaying tactics, Reno urged, so the boy "can get on with his life."

Reno's personal appeal for a swift resolution came just as Elián's father in Cuba pressed his demand for the boy's return.

A seething Juan Miguel González, interviewed via satellite from Havana by Chris Wallace on ABC's *Nightline*, said he has had enough of delaying tactics by the United States and his Florida relatives.

"I want for them to send him back immediately," said González, 31. "They are not his father; they

don't have a say in Elián's life. ... I want for them to return him right away."

He said he doesn't want to go to Miami to pick up his son.

"If I went there, would they give him to me? No. Miami Cubans would just entangle me in their political games," he said, speaking in Spanish.

Gonzalez also said he would approve of having the U.S. Marshal's Office removed the boy by force from his Miami relatives.

Elián's Florida family nevertheless continued its quest to keep the boy in South Florida, where relatives have cared for him since his rescue last November off the coast of Fort Lauderdale.

Reno's words of concern were met with skepticism by Cuban exile leaders who held a meeting in Miami to determine their next action. Demonstrations are off for now, they pledged, while Elián's team of attorneys prepares to file a lawsuit in federal court in Miami.

"We just want a day in court," said Ramon Saul Sanchez, head of the Democracy Movement, who led last week's acts of civil disobedience. "If a judge rules that Elián has to go back, we will respect the decision of a court of law."

The Immigration and Naturalization Service on Thursday rejected a second asylum petition filed this week on Elián's behalf by his Florida relatives. Only the boy's father can represent Elián before the agency, said Carole Florman, a Justice Department spokeswoman.

Some of those who vehemently oppose Elián's return have said they would respect a court ruling

much more than a decision by some "faceless bureaucrat in Washington." Reno on Thursday presented a face behind the federal government's decisions, backed by her reputation for integrity in her hometown of Miami.

"The issue is a father who wants his son home and grandparents who want their grandson home, and these are bonds that should be honored," Reno said.

National opinion polls this month showed growing public support for her position.

A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, for example, found that 56 percent of those polled would approve of the boy's return, while 36 percent thought he should stay with his Florida family. Last month, the same poll found public opinion evenly divided.

The more the boy's case has become a rallying cry in the Cuban exile community, leading to defiance and threats of disruption, the more it has aroused a counter-trend in the rest of the country.

"For most people not caught up in the issue of Cuba, they see a parent who wants to be reunited with his child," said William LeoGrande, a professor of political science and expert on Cuba at American University in Washington.

"As the Cuban community gets more and more angry and vociferous — stopping traffic and threatening to disrupt Miami — that's creating a backlash from other people who see the protests getting all out of proportion, a real obsession," LeoGrande said. "It makes the Cuban-American community, at least the conservative elements, look like extremists."

An argument over those demonstrations turned into a ruckus at the Miami City Commission on Thursday. Commissioner Tomás Regalado — who was seen on television fighting with police officers who were arresting elderly exiles — asked for an inquiry into the treatment of protesters by police, who used tear gas to disperse a small crowd.

Tony Rodriguez, head of the Miami police officers union, lashed back at the commissioner, saying Regalado incited rioters against police.

The controversy over Elián's future will return to the streets again today, when Cuban mothers are scheduled to stage a massive demonstration on the island, demanding that the boy be returned to his homeland.

The Cuban protest will come on the day that immigration officials had set as the deadline for Elián's departure. Reno agreed to suspend the deadline this week, even while saying federal law supersedes the Florida family court's decision to hold a custody hearing on the case in March. She said any legal objections should be settled in federal court.

"A federal court could decide the case on an expedited basis and have it resolved quickly. But litigants could still seek time to prepare briefs. And if the Miami lawyers appeal, that could take more time," said Alex Aleinikoff, former general counsel for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and now law professor at the Georgetown University Law Center.

Legal analysts said immigration

officials have the authority simply to remove the boy from his South Florida family and send him back to Cuba without further ado, but administration officials appear extremely reluctant to do so.

"They may be litigating this for political reasons to show a measure of due process," said Jeffrey Brauerman, a former immigration judge and now a lawyer in Fort Lauderdale. "If they wanted to be high-handed about it, the law is on their side."

"They are cognizant that to do things that way would bring forth large amounts of adverse publicity, even though two-thirds of the country is in favor of the child's reunion with the father," Brauerman said. "Clinton, being a bean-counter, is on the right side of the issue nationally. But in Florida, which has 25 electoral votes, it's another matter."

Reno, a former chief prosecutor in Miami, shrugged off all such political considerations on Thursday and appealed to all parties on a more personal basis.

"Do you remember when you were 6?" she asked. "There were some days I wanted to run away from home, and there were other days when I wanted my mommy so bad I couldn't stand it."

"I believe that the people involved in this situation care about the little boy and want to do what's right by him, and I think they have also indicated a faith in the legal process," Reno said. "Let's let that happen."

Staff Writer Luisa Yanez contributed to this report.