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THE STRUGGLE FOR ELIÁN

Resignation pervades Miami exile community

By DAVID CÁZARES
MIAMI BUREAU

■ THE CUBAN FAMILY'S
"TRAVEL AGENT." 11B

MIAMI—

A sense of resignation seemed to befall Cuban exiles on Friday, the day after a federal appeals court in Atlanta dashed their hopes of keeping Elián González in the United States.

Though bitterly disappointed by the seeming finality of the court's decision, many Cuban-Americans in South Florida are resigned to the boy's ultimate return to communist Cuba.

Even Gloria Estefan, the exile community's favorite daughter, said Friday it was time to move on. "I guess it's time for Elián to go home," Estefan said on NBC's *Today* show. "We're going to have to accept that."

Although the boy's relatives

and their attorneys have vowed to continue pursuing their court battle — possibly to the U.S. Supreme Court — they and the community at large are beginning to pack up the emotional armor they have wrapped around themselves for six months.

Lázaro González, the great-uncle who has fought the legal battle on Elián's behalf, is moving his family from the Little Havana home that was the center of their struggle to a house in West Miami in a couple of weeks, family spokesman Armando Gutierrez said. He said Marisleysis González, 21, the cousin who grew so at-

■ ELIÁN continues on 9A

Elián's Miami family, exiles expect boy's return to Cuba

■ ELIÁN

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tached to Elián, has started her new job as a teacher's aide at Miami High School, from where she graduated in 1997.

While they try to get on with their lives, Elián's Miami relatives have withdrawn from the spotlight, making far fewer public comments than in previous months. They're leaving that to their legal team and "just sitting and waiting for the next step," Gutierrez said.

In the larger Cuban-American community, the talk has begun to turn. Some exile leaders, who for months have stuck to their dual message that Elián must be granted an asylum hearing and must not be returned to Castro's Cuba, have refocused their approach.

"We've renewed our commitment to continue supporting freedom and rights for the Cuban people so that there will be no more Eliáns," said Sylvia Iriondo of Mothers Against Repression.

For many, there is a realization that Elián is no longer the major issue, said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami. Now that Cuban-Americans are putting the struggle over Elián behind them, the focus will be on better informing other Americans about what is happening in Cuba, of "the nature of the regime," he said.

Among Cuban-Americans with more moderate politics — particularly those who believe the hard-line stance of exile organizations has not been effective against Castro — there is a sense that the community has accepted that Elián likely will return to Cuba.

"The passion still is running very deep, but the feeling right now is one of resignation," said Elena



CASTRO'S AT RALLY: Cuban President Fidel Castro greets supporters during Friday's rally in Havana calling for Elián's return to Cuba.

AP photo/Gregory Bull

Freyre, executive director of the Cuban Committee for Democracy. "If you listen to most people the feeling is it's all over but the shouting."

Despite the strong possibility that Elián will soon return to Cuba, more than 350,000 women flooded Havana's main coastal highway on Friday to protest Elián's delayed return. In a rare outdoor appearance, Cuban President Fidel Castro, who called for the rally, greeted the women and listened to speeches by children.

The march was led by Elián's grandmothers, Raquel Rodríguez and Mariela Quintana. They were accompanied by Vilma Espin, president of the Federation of Cuban Women and the wife of Defense Minister Gen. Raul Castro, Fidel Castro's brother.

Meanwhile, the Miami relatives and their legal team are still considering what steps to take next in the courts. Kendall Coffey, the lead attorney in the appellate courts, said the court's ruling that Attorney General Janet Reno and the immigration authorities under her command had the discretion to deny Elián a hearing was a disappointing defeat. Coffey has suggested he will ask the Supreme Court to consider the appeals court's ruling that

immigrants not legally in the country have no constitutional right to apply for asylum, but he said Friday that it will be few days before he and his clients decide how to proceed. "We, all of us, need at least the weekend to absorb things," Coffey said. "We're still absorbing the decision."

Taking the case to the Supreme Court, however, could do little more than help prepare Cuban-Americans for the inevitable, given that the nation's highest court has recognized the federal government's supremacy in immigration matters.

Jeffrey Brauerman, a former immigration judge and INS counsel who is now an immigration lawyer in Plantation, said the lawyers for the Miami relatives likely have done all they could. Now they too will have to face the facts of their diminishing legal hopes.

"They put their best face on it," Brauerman said. "They're going on, but I think there was a feeling of resignation there and some justification for what they've done up to now."

As a result of their limited chances for success, the best the Miami relatives and their attorneys may be able to hope for is a family meeting with Elián, who has been

kept away from them since armed federal took the boy from Little Havana and reunited him with his father in April.

Gregory Craig, the Washington attorney who represents Juan Miguel González, said Friday that González would allow the Miami relatives to see Elián "under certain circumstances."

"The way they should go about trying to see Elián is just approach the father," Craig said on the *Today* show. "They have yet to."

Spencer Eig, one of the lawyers for the Miami relatives, said on the same program that he'd be happy to discuss such a meeting. But Eig said Lázaro González would not agree to first give up his legal fight, as Craig has suggested.

"The demand that the family drop its appeal — that the family not do what it thinks is right to protect Elián's future as a precondition for a visit — well, that's just inhumane," Eig said.

As the two sides bicker over the conditions of such a meeting, Cuban-Americans are preparing for the inevitable. While that occurs, Cuban-Americans will have to put their pain over what happened to Elián behind them.

"The Cuban community has gone through a major shock," Suchlicki said. "The Cuban community realizes that it's in the hands of the court, and if the court said what it said Thursday, there's not much you can do."

Staff writers José Dante Parra Herrera and Robert Nolin contributed to this report, which was supplemented with information from Sun-Sentinel wire services.

David Cázares can be reached at dcazares@sun-sentinel.com or 305-810-5012.