

Town hopeful for Cuba's 'boy hero' to return

By ANITA SNOW

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CARDENAS, Cuba — The empty school desk at Marcelo Salada Primary School is almost a religious icon, a symbol of the 6-year-old boy whose tribulations at sea and in the United States are now the stuff of communist legend.

"You will return to the bosom of your family, your town, your homeland: symbolic child, boy hero," reads a sign on Elian Gonzalez's modest concrete block and brick house, quoting a promise President Fidel Castro made when he visited here in December.

When and if Elian returns to Cuba, he will return a national figure, a boy whose face is plastered on T-shirts and posters across the island.

Here, where Elian was born and raised, townsfolk say they will ensure the child as ordinary a life as possible.

"We are preparing the school to receive Elian like any normal child in a happy classroom," school principal Maribel Reyes said last week.

Fishermen found Elian clinging to an inner tube off Florida's coast Nov. 25. The child immediately became the subject of an international tug-of-war, with his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, demanding his return to Cuba and his Miami relatives fighting to keep him in the United States.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service had ruled that Elian must be returned to his father by last Friday.

But Attorney General Janet Reno lifted the deadline to give Elian's Miami relatives a chance to appeal in federal court.

If Elian's father prevails, Castro has promised a low key homecoming to save the boy more trauma.



A citizen from Elian Gonzalez's hometown of Cardenas, Cuba, was among many rallying and praying for the six-year-old boy's return from the United States. (AP photo)

Elian and his family are expected to be swept away for private time together, then psychological counseling.

"More important than anything is his health, his adaptation," the Cuban leader said last month.

"He must be received with discretion by his family and attended by a team of doctors

and specialists." Still, anonymity will be impossible for the photogenic first-grader.

In Cuba, hundreds of poems were written in his honor. Children he never met have wept for him, given speeches for him, sang songs imploring him to return.

In Cardenas, a town of slightly less than 100,000 people, banners dangling above

potholed streets read, "We will save Elian!"

Gonzalez has built a new bedroom for his son in anticipation of his return. A Power Ranger and several smaller plastic action figures are carefully arranged near a small bed with a Mickey Mouse coverlet. A plastic dump truck and small, well-used bicycle sit nearby.

The toys look meager compared with the train set, motorized dune buggy, designer jackets and tennis shoes his Miami kin gave him for Christmas, when Elian decorated a big Christmas tree and was introduced to Santa Claus.

But his family here says Elian always preferred his homemade toys: a wooden sword carved by his grandfather, a scooter of scrap wood and castoff metal wheels, a kite built with his Uncle Juan Antonio.

Before the fateful crossing that took the life of Elian's mother, Elisabeth Brotons, his divorced parents — and all four grandparents — shared in the child's upbringing.

Sometimes he stayed with his mother, sometimes with his father. His grandfather, Juan Miguel Gonzalez Sr., often took him to school on his bicycle. Both grandmothers were sewing him a karate uniform.

School documents, medical records, and sworn testimony from neighbors, coworkers and others indicate that Elian was well loved and cared for.

Though no longer husband and wife, his parents went to the hospital when Elian was ill, attended school meetings and danced together at the boy's birthday parties.

Nevertheless, Gonzalez says his ex-wife did not inform him when she took Elian on a speedboat bound for Miami, 90 miles away.

Brotons and her boyfriend, often referred to as Elian's stepfather, were among 11 people killed when the boat sank off Florida's coast.

Brotons' mother, Raquel Rodriguez, says she believes her daughter was manipulated into going on the dangerous trip with Elian.

Others in Cardenas suggest that Brotons went for romantic reasons — to be with the boyfriend in the United States.

Elian's Miami relatives' arguments that Brotons gave her life to give the boy freedom in the United States are "a bunch of lies," Rodriguez says.

After the tragedy, her daughter and only child would have wanted Elian returned to his father and grandparents in Cuba, she insists.

If Elian comes back, he will live with his father and parental grandparents, stepmother Nelsy and baby half-brother. His maternal grandparents live nearby.

His entire family here is unabashedly pro-government and grateful to Castro for his support of their fight.

Both grandmothers participated in a massive march by Cuban mothers on Friday. His paternal grandmother, Mariela, said she is willing to go to Miami to retrieve her grandson if she could return immediately to Cuba without being embroiled in legal or political problems.

Elian's paternal grandfather is a retired employee of the Interior Ministry. Elian's father was active in the Communist Youth.

At his home, a portrait of revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara dominates the living room. A sign outside reads "CDR 4," identifying the home as headquarters of the block's Committee for the Defense of the Revolution — an ideological neighborhood group.

"Elian is the son and grandson of the Cuban people," his father said last week. "And I have 11 million attorneys defending my child" — the island's population.