

WORLD & NATION

Cuba uses case to foster anti-Catholic emotion

MIAMI (CNS) — As the U.S. government stepped up efforts to return 6-year-old Cuban boat child Elian Gonzalez to his father, opponents of the boy's return to Cuba stepped up prayers that he would be allowed to remain in the United States. Church officials in Havana, meanwhile, say the Cuban government is using the case to incite public feeling against the church there.

In early April, the nightly prayer vigils led by Cuban-born Catholic and Protestant clergy outside the home of Elian's Miami relatives had spread to Orlando and Tampa as well. Organizers call the Miami vigils the "Cross of the Suffering of the Cuban People."

"This case has united the clergy in one cause," said the Rev. Manuel Salabarria, a Presbyterian pastor.

But the Vatican missionary news agency, Fides, said the Cuban government has used the Elian case to mask a new campaign of repression against the Catholic Church, which is being portrayed as a malicious ally of those trying to keep the child in the United States.

The boy was rescued at sea in November after the boat in which he and other Cubans fleeing their communist-ruled island home capsized. His mother died in the escape attempt. His father, supported by the Cuban and U.S. governments, wants the boy returned to Cuba. Elian has been living in the Miami home of his great uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez.

"The child is adapting to life here" with his Cuban-American relatives, said Father Francisco Santana, spiritual adviser to Elian's Miami relatives.

"His father calls on the phone, and his son says he doesn't want to go back," the priest added.

Father Santana spoke before Elian's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, arrived in the

United States April 6 to pursue his fight to return Elian to Cuba.

Elian's Miami family "is willing to let him go back to Cuba" if that is the decision, "but they don't want to further traumatize him," the Cuban-born priest said in an April 4 telephone interview.

The U.S. relatives were scheduled to meet April 10 with two psychiatrists and a psychologist appointed by Attorney General Janet Reno to reach an agreement on how to reunite the child with his father without undue trauma.

Family spokesman Armando Gutierrez said that the family would argue the psychiatrists should meet with Elian himself to assess whether the boy should go back to Cuba. Elian was not scheduled to meet with the psychiatrists at any point.

"The public perception is the evaluation is for the best interest of the child," said Dr. Carlos Gonzalez, a psychiatrist for the Gonzalez family, at an April 9 news conference outside the family home. "In actuality, it's



Supporters of Elian Gonzalez, a 6-year-old Cuban shipwreck survivor, march in Miami April 10.

a consultation for the INS on how to effect the transfer."

Informed church sources in Havana told Fides that the Cuban government had been trying to direct popular outrage over the Elian case more and more against the church.

One commercial on state TV took particular aim at U.S. Dominican Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin, president of Barry University who hosted a January

meeting between Elian and his grandmothers in Miami Beach. Sister O'Laughlin later said she was in favor of Elian remaining in the United States. The commercial depicted the nun as slowly being trans-

formed into a computer image of a demon, Fides said.

It said Havana police have announced heavy fines for anyone publicly defending the nun's role in the case.

Although Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamillo of Havana said in December that the boy should be reunited with his father in Cuba, the official media did not report that until 10 days afterward, Fides said. Cardinal Ortega later said that the Elian case was being used in Cuba to incite "prejudices and dark feelings" against the church.

Cuban authorities have made small concessions on church freedom since Pope John Paul II's visit there in 1998, but Fides said there were worrisome signs these freedoms were "disappearing, giving way to greater control" over the church's activities.

Protesters in Miami have made use of much religious symbolism in their efforts to keep Elian in the United States.

The Associated Press reported that a mural near Lazaro Gonzalez's house depicts Elian inside an inner tube in rough waters as a woman resembling the Virgin Mary stands over him and a pair of giant hands reach down from the sky.

Clotilde Martinez, a 59-year-old Cuban-American who has been in the United States for 30 years, told AP that she expects God to intervene if the government tries to return Elian to Cuba.

"If God brought him, God will keep him here," she said. "He can have one foot on the airplane, but that child will not go."



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