

10 years on, Elian not angry at Miami relatives

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AP – Cuba's President Raul Castro, left, and Elian Gonzalez attend an official event in Havana, Wednesday, ...

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HAVANA – Elián González says he's not angry at his Miami relatives who fought to keep him in the United States during a nasty international custody battle a decade ago, and is thankful "a large part of the American public" supported him being reunited with his father in Cuba.

Now 16, González's first comments to foreign reporters in years came after President Raúl Castro attended a state celebration Wednesday night marking the 10th anniversary of the famous ex-castaway's return to the island.

"Even though they didn't help me in every way possible, they didn't help me move forward, they are still my own family," Gonzalez said of his South Florida relatives, speaking in a shy, almost timid voice.

"I don't have anger for them," he said. "It's only that it wasn't the best effort possible, and thanks to a large part of the American public, and our public, today I'm with my father and I feel happy here."

When asked about the family's Miami relatives, however, González's father, Juan Miguel, shot back that he was still angry, "because, at any moment, having the boy there and with me giving them opportunities so they can reunite the family, they let themselves get carried away with other things."

He added that bringing his son back was still the right thing to do, saying, "today I'm more sure than I was then."

Elián was a photogenic 5-year-old when a fisherman found him floating off the coast of Florida in an inner tube on Thanksgiving Day 1999, after his mother and others fleeing Cuba drowned trying to reach American soil. His father, who was separated from his mother, had remained on the island.

U.S. immigration officials ruled the boy should return to Cuba over the objections of his Miami relatives and other Cuban exiles, creating a national furor that caused even presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore to weigh in. Many believe Cuban-Americans' outrage at how the case turned out helped cost Gore the White House.

Elián's Miami relatives refused to give him up, while in Cuba, Fidel Castro and religious leaders led constant marches calling for his return. State television crated a nightly "round-table" program that provided updates on the González case and it endures today, though it now discusses all sorts of themes.

U.S. federal agents raided the Little Havana home of Elián's uncle with guns drawn on April 22, 2000, and seized the boy from a closet to return him to his father.

It took the pair another two-plus months to return to Cuba, and when they did, men, women and children jammed the road from Havana's airport, cheering, waving Cuban flags and throwing flowers as the motorcade carrying them passed.

The younger González was celebrated as a hero and his father, a restaurant employee, was elected to parliament. Cuba has worked to play down the public persona of both since then, but the latest anniversary of their triumphant return proved an exception.

The evening marked the first time Cuba's current president stood in for its former leader at an event in González's honor. Fidel Castro personally led major celebrations cheering Cuba's most-famous youngster in years past, marching in parades or delivering lengthy speeches.

But the 83-year-old has not been seen in public since undergoing emergency intestinal surgery and giving up power — first temporarily, then permanently — almost four years ago.

The latest event was organized by Cuba's Council of Churches, which includes all major Cuban religions except the Roman Catholic Church, and was held at the Episcopal Santísima Trinidad Cathedral in Havana. The council staged a celebration in the same church days after Gonzalez's return in 2000.

"It was a triumph, not only of love and justice, but of logic over indecency of spirit, truth against evil," Rev. Marcial Miguel Hernández, president of the Council of Churches, told those assembled Wednesday night.

A bit later, parliament head Ricardo Alarcón said that "for many in the United States, Elián's case was the discovery of the reality that the imperial propaganda, the industry of deception, tried jealously to hide."

A large screen behind all who spoke showed video footage from González's return in 2000.

González wore a red-stripped dress shirt and sat in the front row next to Raúl Castro, who was in a white Guayabera shirt and embraced him and patted him on the back before the event started. His father sat a row behind them, and his stepmother, two younger stepbrothers and grandmother, a faithful churchgoer, were in nearby rows.

"It's the land where I'm from," González said of Cuba. "Here I feel good, and, thanks to my education and the strength my people have given me, today I'm almost a man."

Though the ceremony came two days after the actual anniversary, it also was unusual for Cuba to commemorate June 28, 2000, when González arrived in Cuba, instead of his birthday on Dec. 7, which officials have often celebrated in González's hometown of Cárdenas, in Matanzas province east of the capital.

As he has grown up, authorities have shielded González from foreign reporters and, before the ceremony, his only recent photograph appeared in April, when he sported closely cropped hair and a military school uniform during a Young Communist Union congress.

Government media marked the 10th anniversary last weekend, reporting González is studying to become an officer at the Camilo Cienfuegos military school in Matanzas.

"The boy of yesterday is now a Cuban like any other," said the Communist Youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, adding that "a decade after being used as a toy by the enemies of the revolution ... he is preparing to be a future officer of the Revolutionary Armed Forces."

The revolution is what Cubans call the popular uprising that swept the Castro brothers to power in 1959.

The state news agency AIN wrote that González "enjoys music, is a partygoer, although not a good dancer, who spends hours in front of the computer or weightlifting with his friends."

Associated Press writer Andrea Rodríguez contributed to this report.