

For Dad's neighbors, dispute not complicated

Neighbors of Rafael Izquierdo in Cuba say his 4-year-old daughter, caught in a custody dispute in Miami, should live with him in their town.

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CABAIGUAN, Cuba --

At the end of a tree-lined dirt road and around the corner from a playground with a small Ferris wheel sits a modest single-story home with whitewashed walls and a polished cement floor.

The house is where Rafael Izquierdo -- the man battling for custody of his 4-year-old daughter in a Miami courtroom -- lives with his wife, sister and mother. It's where he says he has readied a room for his daughter, and where the little girl may grow up if Florida child-welfare lawyers fail to convince a judge that Izquierdo is an unfit parent.

In the dead center of Cuba, Cabaiguán lies about 250 miles southeast of Havana. With a population between 30,000 and 50,000, the town is surrounded by government-owned ranches and farmland. As in many rural towns on this island, bicycles outnumber cars.

As lawyers battle in court, villagers here struggle to understand how custody could even be an issue.

"If the mother can't handle the child and here's the father -- who is decent, honest and hard-working -- this is where the child belongs," said a neighbor who knows Izquierdo from working with him in the fields. "If it wasn't for politics, the child would be back here in two minutes."

Attorneys for the Florida Department of Children & Families argue that Izquierdo, 32, is unfit because he allowed the girl's mother, Elena Pérez, to take the child to the United States despite knowing that Pérez was emotionally unstable and abusive. When Pérez tried to kill herself in December 2005, the girl and her half-brother were taken into state custody and now live with Joe and Maria Cubas, a well-to-do couple in Coral Gables.

But people here who know Rafael Izquierdo -- and who are largely unaware of the heated case unfolding in Miami -- described him as a caring father and a hard worker who divided his time between working in potato and malanga fields and fishing for bass in the nearby Zaza reservoir.

"He used to come by all the time and bring [the child] things," said a woman who lived near the one-room house that Pérez shared with her children before taking them to the United States. ``Nobody can say he wasn't a good father."

Izquierdo's family in Cabaiguán refuses to talk to the press and discourages journalists from lingering in the community. During a recent visit to the town, a woman who identified herself as his sister challenged the status of a reporter's travel documents before shooing the writer out.

Despite the flood of press the case has generated in South Florida, people in this town, far off the tourist trail, appeared to have only the vaguest notion about the battle in a Miami courtroom.

There are no T-shirts here emblazoned with the little girl's face. People are not marching down the Havana *Malecón* demanding her return. Unlike in the case of Elián González, the little boy whose custody case in 2000 gripped South Florida for seven months, the Cuban government has not created a website about her, and the state-controlled media has not covered her case.

"This isn't like it was with Elián," said one neighbor. ``The only reason we know about it is because Rafael is our neighbor."

Speculation as to why the Cuban government has stayed on the sidelines this time runs the gamut. Cuba watchers said the government may be concerned that Izquierdo will decide to stay in the United States with his daughter. Others think it may be a reflection of interim leader Raúl Castro's low-key management style.

Some experts suggest Raúl is concerned about antagonizing Washington during such a critical moment for the Cuban revolution.

"Raúl is not the showman that Fidel was," said Bernardo Benes, a Cuban-American activist who met with Fidel regularly in the 1970s and '80s. ``That could certainly be a factor."

Despite the differences in the two custody cases, back in Cabaiguán, neighbors said the core lessons of the Elián saga also apply now.

"Politics should never get in the way of family," one neighbor said. ``Blood ties are sacred."