

## Religious family abandons US, gets lost at sea

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**PHOENIX** — A northern Arizona family that was lost at sea for weeks in an ill-fated attempt to leave the U.S. over what they consider government interference in religion will fly back home Sunday.

Hannah Gastonguay, 26, said Saturday that she and her husband “decided to take a leap of faith and see where God led us” when they took their two small children and her father-in-law and set sail from San Diego for the tiny island nation of Kiribati in May.

But just weeks into their journey, the Gastonguays hit a series of storms that damaged their small boat, leaving them adrift for weeks, unable to make progress. They were eventually picked up by a Venezuelan fishing vessel, transferred to a Japanese cargo ship and taken to Chile where they are resting in a hotel in the port city of San Antonio.

Their flights home were arranged by U.S. Embassy officials, Gastonguay said. The U.S. State Department was not immediately available for comment.

The months-long journey has been “pretty exciting” and “little scary at certain points,” Gastonguay told The Associated Press by telephone.

She said they wanted to go to Kiribati because “we didn’t want to go anywhere big.” She said they understood the island to be “one of the least developed countries in the world.”

Kiribati is a group of islands just off the equator and the international date line about halfway between Hawaii and Australia. The total population is just over 100,000 people of primarily Micronesian descent.

Hannah Gastonguay said her family was fed up with government control in the U.S. As Christians they don’t believe in “abortion, homosexuality, in the state-controlled church,” she said.

U.S. “churches aren’t their own,” Gastonguay said, suggesting that government regulation interfered with religious independence.

Among other differences, she said they had a problem with being “forced to pay these taxes that pay for abortions we don’t agree with.”

The Gastonguays weren’t members of any church, and Hannah Gastonguay said their faith came from reading the Bible and through prayer.