

# Balloon boy's parents to plead guilty over stunt

**DeeDee Correll**

**DENVER:** The Colorado parents who claimed last month that their six-year-old son had floated away in a giant balloon, in a hoax that captivated the US, will plead guilty to avoid the possible deportation of the mother, a Japanese citizen, a defence lawyer said.

Richard Heene will plead guilty to one felony charge of attempting to influence a public official, and his wife, Mayumi, will plead guilty to a misdemeanour charge of making a false report to law enforcement officers, Mr Heene's lawyer, David Lane, said.

He said the pleas were part of a deal with prosecutors and the Heenes would be sentenced to probation, although it is possible Mr Heene could serve 90 days in jail and his wife 60 days.

A spokeswoman for the Larimer County district attorney's office would not confirm the plea deal - which would be subject to a judge's approval - but issued a statement saying criminal charges against the couple had been filed on Thursday.

Under the law, the charge against Mr Heene carries a possible penalty of up to six years in prison and a fine of up to \$US500,000 (\$537,500). The penalty for his wife's charge is up to six months in county jail and a fine of up to \$US750, prosecutors said.

The Heenes, amateur storm chasers who had appeared on the American television show *Wife Swap*, allegedly staged the hoax to try to gain their own reality television show.

They told authorities that their youngest son, Falcon, had sneaked into a helium balloon



**The Heenes ... with sons Bradford, Falcon and Ryo.** Photo: Reuters

that lifted off accidentally from their backyard on October 15.

The journey of the balloon - a silvery craft reminiscent of a

UFO - was watched by millions of people live on television.

Some offered prayers for the boy's safe return, and flights in

and out of Denver International Airport were diverted.

When the balloon landed in a field two hours later and was found to be empty, a search was begun for Falcon, who was presumed to have fallen to his death. He was later found hiding in the Heenes' garage.

Authorities' suspicions were raised a few hours afterwards while the Heenes were being interviewed on television on *Larry King Live*. When Falcon was asked by his father, during the interview, why he had stayed in hiding for so long, he turned to his parents and said: "You said we were doing this for a show."

Court papers say that Mrs Heene admitted to police several days later that the entire escapade had been a publicity stunt.

Los Angeles Times