

Castro at odds with Kirchner

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BUENOS AIRES - The Argentine media is making much ado about the friction between Argentine President Néstor Kirchner and Fidel Castro last week over a dissident doctor who wants to leave Cuba.

Kirchner took the opportunity to ask the Cuban leader, who was a guest at a meeting of the trade bloc Mercosur, to allow surgeon Hilda Molina, a one-time Castro ally, to leave Cuba to be with her children and grandchildren already in Argentina.

According to the media covering the South American trade-bloc meeting, Castro was not pleased, and relations between the two leaders became chilly. Kirchner did not appeal to Castro face-to-face even though they were in the same room. Instead, the Argentine president had a letter, barely three paragraphs, passed through the two countries' foreign ministers.

Clarín, the largest newspaper in Argentina, reported that Castro was "uncomfortable" because Kirchner surprised him with such a request after rolling out the red carpet for the 79-year old Castro, who has led Cuba since 1959.

Argentina's La Nación went further to say that Castro was bothered. One columnist, Joaquín Morales Solá, gave this more detailed account from someone "close" to Kirchner. Solá reported that when Argentine diplomats warned Cuban diplomats that Kirchner wanted to speak to Castro about the Molina case, Castro was in flight to Argentina and almost ordered that the plane return to Cuba.

"Things went more or less like this: The government of Argentina let the Cubans know that Kirchner would talk about the Molina case in a private meeting," Solá wrote in a column. "No. Castro did not accept this plan."

Solá continued: "He is traveling to Argentina to meet with the Mercosur, not to speak about Hilda Molina. . . So Kirchner said he would deliver a letter instead. But Castro again said no."

Finally, according to Solá, Kirchner threatened to speak about Molina in front of the entire meeting -- and not sign the Mercosur trade pact with Cuba. Castro coldly accepted the letter, he reported.

"One should recognize that Kirchner this time backed his discourse about human rights," said Solá. La Nación frequently criticizes Kirchner.

Foreign ministry officials this week expressed optimism over the Molina case. Still, the exposure is apparently making Molina a bit nervous.

She said in a radio interview broadcast in Buenos Aires that she was "paranoid" about how Cuban officials would react.

"I know that God repays all good action, and the Argentine people, the press and the government will receive the grace of God," she said.