

For Cuban Exiles, a Day Filled With Celebrations, Rumors and the Wait for News

The New York Times
August 2, 2006

MIAMI, Aug. 1 — One exile group spent Tuesday afternoon replacing parts on aging boats its members hoped to sail soon to [Cuba](#). Another met all night, debating how to help dissidents on the island thwart [Fidel Castro's](#) plan for his brother Raúl to succeed him. And in Little Havana in 92-degree heat, one confident crowd wagered that Mr. Castro was not ailing but dead, singing, "Na na na na, na na na na, Fidel, goodbye."



Fidel Castro's announcement drew cheering crowds early Tuesday morning in the Miami area, which is home to many Cubans who fled the island.



Cuban exiles reacted with exuberance at the news that Fidel Castro had temporarily ceded power to his brother late Monday night.

Though the delirious first response to the announcement of Mr. Castro temporarily ceding power dampened as myriad questions went unanswered, anticipation remained palpable here on Tuesday. Throughout the day hundreds of thousands of Cubans in South

Florida awaited updates from the island they fled, mostly to escape Mr. Castro's authoritarian rule and harsh economic conditions, and officials watched for signs of unrest on land and sea.

Mayor Carlos Alvarez of Miami-Dade County said that the county's emergency operations center had opened in case developments in Cuba stirred chaos here, and added that a rumor-control hot line, operating around the clock since Monday night, had received 500 calls.

Mr. Alvarez, who begged people not to block traffic if they reveled outdoors, said that things had remained surprisingly orderly but that Miamians were bursting with questions about this turn of events they had dreamed of for years.

"Is Castro dead?" he said, repeating the most frequent inquiry. "Is it safe to go outside?"

Celebrations erupted around the county after Cuban national television reported the extraordinary development — that Mr. Castro had undergone emergency surgery for intestinal bleeding and had temporarily ceded power to his brother Raúl — around 9 p.m. Monday. Revelers of all ages honked horns incessantly, clanged pots and pans and shouted, "Cuba libre!" The police beefed up their presence and blocked off several streets, including part of Calle Ocho in Little Havana.

Information remained scant, and speculation — a finely honed art among Miami Cubans, accustomed to having to guess about conditions on the tightly controlled island just 90 miles from Key West — ruled the day. In that sense, it was similar to two other times when Mr. Castro's health faltered: in 2001, when he almost fainted two hours into a televised speech, and in 2004, when he stumbled on a stage, breaking an arm and fracturing a knee.

"Obviously something has happened," said Joe Garcia, a political strategist for [Democrats](#) and the former executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, the largest exile group. "This is a guy who, the last time he went into surgery that we know of, made a point of saying he had no general anesthesia and was on his

cellphone giving orders the whole time. He was unwilling to cede the stage at all. That he did so now in such a dramatic fashion implies something big.”

All morning, local radio stations buzzed with hopeful conjecture, and one host even phoned a funeral home in Havana to mischievously feign grief. The Coast Guard watched for boats taking to the Florida Straits, but said it had seen no unusual activity along the Florida or Cuban coasts.

Gov. [Jeb Bush](#) said Florida and the Coast Guard had a joint plan to minimize any influx of Cuban immigrants if Mr. Castro died or relinquished power. Many Cuban exiles have envisioned taking boats to the island to fetch relatives the moment Mr. Castro is gone.

“I think that you don’t want to have mass migration that creates the loss of life and creates tremendous hardships for local communities and for our state,” Mr. Bush said in Tallahassee.

Alfredo Mesa, the current head of the Cuban American National Foundation, said his executive board had met all night and was conferring with dissidents on the island about how to keep Raúl Castro from permanently taking power. Mr. Mesa was among a number of exile leaders who said that instead of rushing to Cuba, the role of Cuban-Americans should be to lend financial and political support to dissidents there from afar.

“We know there are people at all levels of power in the Cuban government that want to return sovereignty, basic freedom and respect for human rights to the Cuban people,” Mr. Mesa said. “There are people who can make that change possible if in fact they know there is support abroad for them in this very critical hour.”

In Little Havana, Miami’s largest Cuban neighborhood, people spouted theories about Mr. Castro, who will turn 80 on Aug. 13. Some said he was already dead, others that he was faking illness to gauge how the island he has ruled for 47 years would respond.

“Oh my God, this is really something!” said Felipe Mendez, 69, who left Cuba in 1980.

Peter Bello, who sells cigars at Cuban Tobacco Trading on Calle Ocho, said the fact that Raúl Castro had not appeared publicly or issued a statement made him suspicious.

“We strongly believe this could be one of his tricks,” said Mr. Bello, 49.

Ramón Saul Sánchez, leader of the Democracy Movement, an exile organization that once ran flotillas to the waters off Cuba to protest human rights abuses, said his group was replacing parts on its few boats and fueling up to take food and other supplies to the island. But like other exile leaders, he preached caution.

Mr. Mesa of the Cuban American National Foundation said it was crucial for the roughly 830,000 Cuban immigrants in South Florida to stay calm and not fight about what is best for Cuba after Castro. He and Mayor Manny Diaz of Miami said community groups might organize large rallies at places like the Orange Bowl to channel some of the excitement, though nothing was in the works yet.

“We have disagreed on the issue of Cuba, but this is a time to stand together and be in a position to support the courageous men and women who live there,” he said. “Demonstrate, celebrate, but do it peacefully. Do it appropriately.”