

Build-up to Castro's fall leaves some empty

After waiting 47 years for Fidel Castro's death, some exiles felt the news of the Cuban leader's ceding of power was anticlimactic.

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For so long, Cuban exiles played it out as a fantasy with all the fireworks: Fidel would be dead, Cuba would be free and the champagne corks would fly as the celebrations raged in Miami and on the island.

Reality has proven a letdown. For all the pot-banging and horn-honking in Little Havana, Hialeah and elsewhere in Miami, Monday's news that Castro had ceded power and might be on the brink of death has mostly been met with restraint -- and disillusionment.

On Tuesday morning, streets where hundreds had danced the night before were back to normal. Exiles went to work. Cuban radio stations returned to regular programming. There is a sense of expectancy, but for many exiles, no elation.

"It feels like when I was a kid and used to lean over the edge of tall buildings just to get that sinking feeling in my stomach," said Rafael Lima, a University of Miami professor of filmmaking who left Cuba when he was 9. "It feels like we're on the edge of something, that we can't go back from here. But it feels like a false ending. It's something I tell my screenwriting students not to do. It feels like we just stumbled to the end."

Exiles may have spent 47 years dreaming of cathartic celebrations. But for every flag waver and rumba stepper on the streets Monday night, there are dozens more who speak in flat tones, emotions on ice as they wait for true confirmation of Castro's end.

PENT-UP EMOTIONS

"When you know you are dealing with a regime that manipulates information, it simply puts you on slippery emotional territory," said Cuban radio personality Julio Estorino. "A lot of people who would be screaming for joy instead are forced to contain themselves."

The fact that many exiles are in an emotional holding pattern is a far cry from their own expectations of how they would meet the news of Castro's death -- even the first stirrings of the end. Instead of happiness or relief, there is anxiety and frustration.

"It's twisted," said Cuban-American filmmaker Joe Cardona, 38. "After all those years of waiting for the news, it's kind of hollow. It's like going to sleep with a lump in your throat that you can't exactly explain."

Said Eddy Arango, 67, a retired lawyer and a political prisoner in the early days of Castro's revolution: "I won't allow myself to feel anything because Castro has proven so Machiavellian for so long that we don't know what to believe as truth. He could already be dead. He could be perfectly healthy and this could be strategy to see how news of his death would unfold. It's all speculation, as it always has been with Cuba."

Cuban-American psychologist Luly Casares says she expects the moment of uncertainty to have a lingering effect on some exiles.

"It's extremely disappointing," Casares said. "Every Cuban we know had a fantasy about the day Fidel died, a fantasy about Cuba being free, a fantasy about going back home. You live on fantasy because

fantasy gives you hope. But fantasies are always going to be bigger than reality. Now reality has hit and we realize even if he is dead, things won't change as we envisioned. And hope turns into a sense of sadness and loss."

But even without confirmation that Castro's days are indeed numbered, some refuse to keep waiting before they give in to celebrations.

"Tonight, my wife and I are planning to have lobster and champagne while we listen to Willy Chirino," said Gustavo Perez-Firmat, a Columbia University professor of Cuban literature who has written several books on the Cuban exile experience.

`EMPTY VICTORY`

The celebration will be bittersweet.

"We have been waiting for this moment for 47 years and I'm ready. I'm sure he's dead. You can't write a statement like Castro supposedly wrote if you're just out of surgery. It sounds more like his last will and testament. But the truth is, the celebration is too late for me because I want to talk to my father and my uncles about it but they are all dead.

"What I have left is sadness. But I need to celebrate anyway, even though it feels like an empty victory."

Even with hard proof that Castro's dead, some exiles say they won't party.

TIME TO COPE

Said UM Professor Lima:

"Even when we do know for sure, I'm not going to jump up and down. For me it will be quiet and somber. It's as if you flung open the doors of Auschwitz and all these people start walking out. They are witnesses to an entire legacy of horror and family separation. It has been almost 50 years of anguish. It's not easy to feel giddy."