

Speculation swirls in Miami, Havana

The Cuban government said Fidel Castro is on the mend. In Miami, exile leaders pushed Cuban dissidents to launch a nationwide movement.

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CUBAVISION VIA AP TELEVISION NEWS

This image from a broadcast on Cuban television station Cubavision shows a reporter announcing that Cuban President Fidel Castro's is in stable condition and in "good spirits" after surgery, Tuesday, Aug. 1. Castro said Tuesday that his health was stable after surgery, according to a statement read on state television, as the Communist government tried to impose a sense of normalcy on the island's first day in 47 years without Castro in charge.

An ambiguous, somewhat cryptic statement issued Tuesday night in Fidel Castro's name said his health was "stable" and "my spirit is perfectly fine." But it also contained clues that a complete recovery might not be certain.

"A real evolution of the state of one's health requires the passing of time," the statement said. "The most I could say is that the situation will remain stable for many days before a verdict can be delivered."

That left Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits still in limbo today, seeking answers to two basic yet monumental questions:

Can Castro stage a full recovery from the unspecified intestinal bleeding that required an emergency operation? Is Cuba finally on the cusp of change after 47 years of repression?

National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón said the "final moment is still very far away." U.S. officials said they believed Castro is still alive.

But no new pictures surfaced, no other proof was offered -- not even what hospital he's in -- and Castro's brother and the inheritor of his power, Raúl, also remained out of sight. Fidel Castro is 79; his brother, 75.

"It's really serious, because otherwise he would speak," a Havana resident named Jesus, who asked that his last name be withheld, said by telephone about Fidel Castro.

In Miami, meanwhile, new street celebrations flared with benign jubilation Tuesday night, especially outside the Versailles restaurant. Hundreds of cars drove along Calle Ocho, music blaring from radios, passengers hanging out the windows handing out miniature Cuban flags.

Earlier in the day, top Cuban exile leaders urged Cuban dissidents to ignite a nationwide movement of civil disobedience to protest the temporary transfer of power from Castro to his brother.

"It's time for the military not to shoot" at those who mount peaceful protests, said U.S. Rep. Lincoln Díaz-Balart. Travelers returning to Miami from Havana said they noticed a substantially enhanced police presence in many areas Tuesday.

Castro's regime is "historically dead," Díaz-Balart said, and Castro is "rotting" even if he is still alive.

Cuba's uncharacteristically detailed announcement Monday night of Castro's serious illness, his major surgery for "sustained" intestinal bleeding and his ceding of power to his brother triggered speculation and anticipation in Miami and Havana.

Alarcón called the surgery a "delicate operation," but no other details -- including the precise nature of the ailment -- were shared. Specialists in the United States said the symptoms could describe cancer, peptic ulcers or a variety of other problems.

"I cannot invent good news, because that wouldn't be ethical," Castro supposedly said in the statement read on Cuba's *Mesa Redonda*, Round Table, broadcast. "And if the news were bad, the only one to benefit is the enemy."

In Washington, White House spokesman Tony Snow said the administration believed that Castro is still alive -- and added that Raúl Castro was no improvement.

"The fact that you have an autocrat handing power off to his brother does not mark an end to autocracy," Snow said.

And so, in workplaces, on local broadcasts and elsewhere around South Florida, speculation swirled around Castro's true condition.

"I hope to God he's dead," said Miami-Dade Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz. "But I think he might still be alive."

"Either way, this will be the start of the demise of the regime," Diaz said. "It's history because this is the first time that Castro relinquished power."

But financier Raúl Mas Canosa, younger brother of late exile leader Jorge Mas Canosa, said it's "a little bit premature to sort of celebrate."

"Fidel Castro's been around for much longer than any of us care to remember, and I think he's a very wily, very conniving individual," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me if this was just sort of a test run to sort of figure out how people are going to react to his eventual transfer of power."

In other developments:

- Snow said that the temporary transfer of power would not generate an immediate change in U.S. policy toward Cuba. "There are no plans to reach out," he said, calling Castro's brother his "prison keeper."

The State Department reiterated its policy that the United States would only act if a transitional government moved toward democracy.

In that case "the United States and the American people will do everything that we can to stand by the Cuban people in their aspirations for a democracy," said Sean McCormack, a State Department spokesman.

- Get-well messages poured in to Havana. Some came from the governments of Spain, Italy, Nicaragua and, in South America, President Evo Morales of Bolivia and President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, both close to Castro.

Chile's ambassador to Cuba, Jaime Toha, said there was complete calm across the island despite the "strong and surprising" news.

- Some activist leaders in Miami began mapping plans to join any opposition campaigns that might be launched by Cuban dissidents.

"We want to get there and help with whatever we can . . . ," said Ramón Saúl Sánchez, leader of the Democracy Movement. "We are talking with our attorneys to see what we can do legally."

At the same time, U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, who is Cuban American, warned about the dangers of any action that could encourage mass migration, which could endanger lives.

"I think people need to keep their emotions in check, difficult as it is," Martinez said.

State and federal authorities said they would block any efforts to reach Cuba by boat from Florida.

"Don't attempt to leave," said Amos Rojas, regional director for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. "If there is a problem on the island, the Coast Guard will blockade it, and we're not going to let people go from here."

- Police officers in South Florida praised Cuban exiles for remaining orderly during street celebrations -- and urged them to keep it that way.

"We cannot block streets, and the reason is public safety," said Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez.

Said Miami-Dade spokesman Alvaro Zabaleta: "As long as everybody celebrates in a peaceful way, which is what's happened so far, we're fine with it. We don't want to interfere with their joy."

Archbishop John Favalora asked Cuban Catholics to remain calm and pray that any power shift in Cuba is peaceful and benefits all Cuban people.

"The archbishop has asked that we all pray, that we have tranquility and peace so that we are in deep communion with the people of Cuba," said the Rev. Fernando Hería, pastor of St. Brendan Catholic Church and a native of Cuba who left the island at age 11.

Speaking during a news conference in his Miami office, Díaz-Balart said that Cuba's dissident community has been appealing to exiles in South Florida and elsewhere to serve as its mouthpiece to promote passive resistance.

Now, Díaz-Balart said, it boils down to this: People inside Cuba must demand change.

He and the other Miami-based Cuban-American members of Congress seized the opportunity to rally behind a campaign launched last week by exile organizations to promote civil disobedience and passive resistance in Cuba.

Díaz-Balart said that the U.S. government had obtained a list of 56 Cubans who have participated in violent "*actos de repudio*," acts of repudiation, against dissidents and pro-democracy activists on the island.

He said that all people who participate in such activities from now on would be identified and brought to justice. He emphasized that the military should allow peaceful protests and restrain themselves from harming fellow Cubans seeking change.

"It's time for the military not to shoot," Díaz-Balart said. "They either stand with the Cuban people, or their names will be on a list of infamy."

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a member of the House International Relations Committee, said the United States has no interest in talking with Raúl Castro.

"We have nothing to say to Raúl Castro," Ros-Lehtinen said. "He is part of the problem, not part of the solution. He's an assassin. He's a liar. . . . The U.S. is not fooled by him."