

# Castro Is 'Stable,' but His Illness Presents Puzzle

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MEXICO CITY, Aug. 1 — [Cuba](#) was wrapped in uncertainty on Tuesday, as the Communist government released a statement suggesting that its longtime ruler, [Fidel Castro](#), had survived intestinal surgery but giving few details of his condition.



Claudia Daut/Reuters

A man carried a Cuban flag in Havana after a rally on Tuesday.

After a long day of speculation and rumor, an announcer on state-run television and radio said he had spoken to Mr. Castro and read a statement that he said had been written by the Cuban leader, who will be 80 on Aug. 13. In the statement, Mr. Castro said that his condition was stable but that the full extent of his illness would not be known for several days.

“The most I can say is that the situation will remain stable for many days before a verdict can be given,” the statement said. “In spirits, I find myself perfectly fine. The important thing is that the country is running perfectly well. The country is prepared for its defense by the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the people. Our compatriots will know everything at the appropriate time.”

State-run television showed no pictures of Mr. Castro, nor did it broadcast his voice. It remained unknown where the surgery took place or where he was recuperating.

On Monday night, he handed power temporarily to his brother, Raúl, to undergo surgery to repair intestinal bleeding, according to a statement read on Cuban television.

With little information released about Mr. Castro's symptoms or his surgery, it is impossible to say speculate about his illness or his chance for recovery, doctors outside of Cuba said today. Possibilities range from cancer to intestinal bleeding or an intestinal infection. All would be treated with major abdominal surgery, that would require weeks of recovery.

After such surgery, patients generally have tubes inserted through their nose into the stomach to drain off stomach secretions. Such tubes make it difficult to speak and are unsightly, perhaps making Mr. Castro reluctant to come on camera.

News that Mr. Castro had relinquished power for the first time in his 47-year rule prompted expressions of concern from leftist leaders in Latin America and set off immediate celebration among Cuban exiles in Miami.

The transfer also set off intense speculation about Cuba's future. Raúl Castro, who has acted as defense minister for decades, made no public appearances. He is 75 years old and seems to lack the charisma, political skill and rhetorical brilliance of his brother. His detractors in the United States say he will find it hard to hold the government together if Mr. Castro were to die.

Sean McCormack, a State Department spokesman, made it clear on Tuesday that the United States would take an active role in shaping events on the island if the Cuban leader dies. "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," he said.

President Bush said Monday, before Mr. Castro's illness was announced, that the United States policy would be to undermine Raúl Castro's rise to power. "We are actively working for change in Cuba," he said, "not simply waiting for change."

There were unconfirmed reports that the Cuban military had been placed on high alert on Tuesday morning, and that civil defense militias were warned to brace themselves for unrest and to keep a weather eye out for a United States invasion, residents said in telephone interviews.

Rumors ran through Havana. Some people pointed to the fact that Mr. Castro's message had been written on a computer as evidence that his health was much worse than the government had let on.

"People are very disoriented," one history professor said in a telephone interview, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he feared arrest. "Dissidents are worried and fear that at any moment there could be a wave of detentions."

Still, the streets of Havana were relatively quiet, as people went about their daily lives, trying to eke out a living in the island's crippled economy. "The situation is totally tranquil, normal," said Armando Briñis, a government spokesman. "Everyone is working. There are no soldiers in the street. Nothing like that."

Dora Fleites Gutiérrez, 51, a hospital worker in the central city of Santa Clara, said a pall of sadness hung over the nation.

"The people are experiencing fear and sadness at the thought of losing the commander," she said. "But if the worst happens and he were to die, then his brother will remain and everything will continue to be the same. We don't fear there will be a change with Raúl. He has the same ideals."



In Guanabacoa, Cuba, east of Havana, hundreds rallied in support of the ailing Fidel Castro and heard an army officer encourage them.



Fidel Castro temporarily relinquished his presidential powers to his brother Raul.

**Mr. Castro has been a major world figure and a leftist hero since he and a band of guerrillas forced Cuba's previous dictator, Fulgencio Batista, from power in January 1959. He became an implacable enemy of the United States in the early 1960's, allying the island with the Soviet Union and bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war during the administration of President [John F. Kennedy](#).**

**As Communist rulers fell in Eastern Europe or opened up their markets in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Mr. Castro clung stubbornly to his ideology and the Cuban economy, long crippled by a United States embargo, continued a slow slide that impoverished most of its people.**

Raúl Castro has been at his brother's side since the revolution. Though in his youth he was a Communist hard-liner, he has in recent years seemed to lean toward China's model of a one-party system with open markets.

In the early 1990's, when the collapse of the Soviet Union devastated Cuba's economy, it was Raúl Castro who supported allowing more free enterprise for small-time entrepreneurs and expanding the island's tourism sector. "Beans are more important than cannons," he remarked.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Raúl Castro changed with the times, adopting capitalist management practices to improve the efficiency of the 50,000-member Revolutionary Armed Forces. Under his leadership, the army also obtained major stakes in industry and ownership of plantations, beach resorts and an airline.

"I suspect that Raúl is a transitory figure given his age and lack of charisma and lack of an independent power base," Dario Moreno, a political science professor at Florida International University in Miami.

In his statement on Monday, Mr. Castro blamed the strain of recent trips to Argentina and eastern Cuba for his health, saying stress "touched off an acute intestinal distress with sustained bleeding, which forced me to undergo delicate surgery." He also suggested that he would be unable to carry out his duties for several weeks.

His health has been a closely guarded state secret for years. The statement read on state television on Tuesday by Randy Alonso, a moderator on a daily news program, said the daylong silence about Mr. Castro's condition after surgery was necessary for national security.

"In the case of Cuba, because of the plans of the empire," Mr. Castro said, referring to the United States, "my state of health has become a state secret that cannot be continually divulged, and compatriots should understand this."

The Cuban leader has looked frail in the last two years and in October 2004, he tripped and broke his left knee and right arm after a speech. Determined to keep control of government affairs, he refused tranquilizers and general anesthesia during an operation to repair his knee.

The news that he was suffering from intestinal bleeding, however, took the world by surprise. With fascinated curiosity, South Americans closely followed news about Mr. Castro's illness and the speculation about whether he had already died.

His popularity in the region has dropped in recent years, but he remains an emblematic figure even to those who have no use for his politics, and news media were abuzz with debate about his health and legacy.

In his trademark green fatigues and graying beard, Mr. Castro created a sensation during his most recent foreign trip late last month to Argentina, for a meeting of presidents belonging to the [Mercosur](#) trade group. During the two days of the gathering, he appeared somewhat frail, but was as combative as ever.

When an Argentine journalist asked him about the Bush administration's plans to influence who would succeed him, Mr. Castro lashed out, yelling, "Why don't you go ask Bush for an explanation?"

The leftist president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, who has forged a tight relationship with Cuba since his election earlier this year, wished the Cuban leader "a speedy recovery." The government of President [Hugo Chávez](#) in Venezuela, another close ally of Mr. Castro's, issued a statement saying Mr. Castro was "advancing positively" after surgery.

President Alan García's government in Peru urged the [Organization of American States](#) to begin planning to do what it can to avoid a violent transition of power after Mr. Castro's death. "Cuba could have a civil war, as there are opposition leaders and impassioned partisans of the regime," Jorge del Castillo, Mr. García's chief of staff, told reporters.

Some government opponents predicted that the news of Mr. Castro's surgery would be the start of larger changes for the island nation.

"It is clear that this is the start of the transition," Manuel Cuesta Morúa, a dissident, told