

# Latin Americans hail, decry Castro

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**LIMA** - Latin Americans generally sympathized with Fidel Castro Tuesday, with reports that the Cuban leader had stepped aside to undergo surgery leading news coverage throughout the day.

In a region where Castro tried -- but failed -- during the 1960s to export his Communist revolution, the Cuban leader is generally seen as an affectionate wise elder, especially at a time when President Bush is so widely disliked in the region.

The strongest expressions of concern not surprisingly came from Castro's two closest Latin American allies, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales.

"With all our heart, we hope that President Fidel Castro gets well as quickly as possible," Chávez said from Vietnam, where he is leading a trade delegation. "You can imagine how one feels upon waking up in the morning and hearing this news. Long live Fidel Castro!"

Chávez appeared with Castro before tens of thousands of supporters at a local university during last month's Mercosur trade summit in Córdoba, Argentina, where the two men visited the boyhood home of Castro's comrade in arms, Che Guevara.

Argentina's Clarín newspaper reported that at one point, addressing concerns about his age and health, Castro referred to the biblical figure and said, "Methuselah lived to be 800 years old. Why worry about me? I haven't even gotten to 10 percent of that."

During the trip, which was kept secret until the last minute, Castro signed a trade agreement with the South American trade bloc. He seemed visibly tired and slow-moving, but still lit up with anti-imperialist rhetoric during a three-hour speech at the university.

Crowds of followers -- as well as the curious -- flocked to see him in Córdoba, a typical occurrence for Castro on his Latin America forays.

Bolivia's Morales also visited with Castro in Córdoba. On Tuesday, he called Castro "a brother" and "a friend."

Some 1,800 Cuban doctors have been treating the poor for free in Bolivia since shortly after Morales took power in late January.

Meanwhile, in Santiago, some 100 sympathizers -- most from Chile's Communist Party -- rallied on Castro's behalf Tuesday in front of the Cuban Embassy. Cuba's ambassador briefly came out to salute them.

Cuba's embassy in Peru received dozens of phone calls from ordinary citizens and political leaders alike wishing Castro a speedy recovery, said an embassy official who asked not to be quoted by name.

But not everyone in Latin America was wishing Castro well.

Cuban exiles throughout Latin America -- just like exiles and Cuban-Americans in Miami -- were dreaming anew that Castro would finally pass and allow them to return home.

"If Fidel dies and there's a transition with free elections, I'd go back immediately," said Francisco Raúl Díaz, a chauffeur in Lima who provided the bus in 1980 that crashed through the Peruvian Embassy fence and precipitated the Mariel boatlift. "I'd open a business applying the lessons from capitalism that I've learned here."

Díaz, who has lived in Peru since 1993, said friends of his in Cuba had expressed skepticism Tuesday that Castro was actually sick. "With Castro, you can never be sure about anything, not until he's buried underground."

Peru's new prime minister, Jorge del Castillo, expressed concern that Castro's death "might provoke a civil war in Cuba."

Monday night's news prompted front-page coverage Tuesday throughout much of Latin America.

In Peru, La República, a tabloid newspaper, carried a full-page photo of Castro looking downward with the headline: "The End of an Era."

Peru 21, another tabloid, headlined, "Fidel Castro very sick" with a photo of him wearing fatigues and saluting.

In Argentina, local television channels, radio stations and newspaper websites featured live, regular updates on Castro's health throughout the day and commentary about what his passing could mean.