

Cuban Official Assures Country That Castro Is on Mend

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HAVANA, Aug. 5 -- Fidel Castro is recovering satisfactorily from stomach surgery, Cuba's vice president said Saturday, while government sources said he had started to eat and sit up in bed.

Vice President Carlos Lage Dávila, speaking on a trip to Bolivia, was the third Cuban official in the past two days to reassure the Communist-ruled country that Castro was on the mend from surgery for internal bleeding. He gave no further details in the report by the state news agency Prensa Latina.

In Havana, where residents were stunned at Monday's announcement that Castro had temporarily ceded power to his younger brother, Raúl Castro, sources who had spoken to government officials said that while he may not have the all-clear yet, Fidel Castro was doing well for a man of 79. Neither Castro brother has been seen since the handover of power.

In Brazil, the Folha de SaoPaulo newspaper reported that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and members of the ruling Workers' Party had been told by Cuban officials that Fidel Castro had a malignant stomach tumor and his condition was worse than has been publicly admitted. A Brazilian government spokesman said the report was unfounded.

A government source in Venezuela said President Hugo Chávez was now unlikely to fly to Havana this weekend to see his friend Castro. Chávez has helped keep Cuba's government afloat since the collapse of its former benefactor, the Soviet Union, through cheap oil and billion-dollar payments for Cuban doctors to work in Venezuelan slums.

If Chávez flew to Cuba to see Castro, it could indicate that the Cuban leader was lucid and in a condition to receive visitors. However, Daniel Ortega, the former leftist president of Nicaragua, traveled to Cuba on Saturday to check on Castro. Ortega's Sandinista government in the 1980s was backed by Cuba, and he is running for president again in November.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in a message beamed to Cuba on Friday night, told the island's residents that "much is changing there" and now is the time to push for democracy.

But Cuba's culture minister, Abel Prieto, told reporters at a Havana event that Rice's message, which followed a similar statement by President Bush, would fall on deaf ears. "Nobody in Cuba is going to listen to a message that comes from a functionary of a foreign government," he said.

