

# Santiago calm - on the surface

## Cuba's second-largest city remained calm but worried about the uncertain condition of leader Fidel Castro and the island's future.

The Miami Herald  
Aug. 08, 2006

In the birthplace of Fidel Castro's revolution, in a corner of Cuba known for its rebelliousness, residents say the calm on the streets seems to be a thin cover for concern over *el comandante's* mysterious health crisis.

"There is a lot of uncertainty here," said a Catholic priest. "Not knowing exactly what's happening is the main source of anxiety. . . . The people are very worried, even if it doesn't appear like that."

Santiago de Cuba, the island's second-largest city, on the surface seems as calm as Havana following the announcement eight days ago that the 79-year-old Castro had undergone surgery for intestinal bleeding and temporarily ceded power to his younger brother Raúl.

Dozens of people lined up recently along San Pedro Street to buy \$2.50 tickets for the 12:30 p.m. showing of a movie about famed singer Benny Moré. At a park nearby, scores of adults and children enjoyed an afternoon of ice cream and amusement rides.

And a few blocks up the street, a bookstore with an entire wall of books dedicated to Castro hosted a birthday party for a child, with yellow and white balloons.

"We know that [Castro] is in the final walk of life, but we have all of the confidence in the world of our system," said 63-year-old Lisbea Rodríguez.

But others are plainly worried in Santiago, a city with a historic reputation for rebellion. Castro launched his revolution in Santiago in 1953 with a failed attack on the Moncada army barracks, and then based his guerrilla fight in the surrounding Sierra Maestra mountains.

Eastern Cuba has a large number of Afro-Cubans, who are not always welcome in the rest of the island. Many police officers deployed in Havana are Afro-Cubans from the east, and migrants from the east to Havana are often referred to as Palestinians, a slur referring to their homelessness.

Police are maintaining a strong presence on the streets, and residents say the government has put on alert the Committees for the Protection of the Revolution, which are feared neighborhood watch groups, although there have been no reports of roundups of government critics.

For the past two nights, jets presumed to be military aircraft have been flying over the city, the residents added.

### HAPPY OR WORRIED

Reynaldo, a father of two whose oldest son is in the Cuban military, said the reports of Castro's "complicated" surgery and his failure to appear in public since July 31 have riled some of Santiago's residents.

"Some people are very happy, and some people are very worried," said Reynaldo, who, like most Cubans these days, declined to give his surname out of fear of government retribution.

Such fears and sometimes enigmatic comments make it difficult for outsiders to judge the real sentiments of people in Santiago, even though the residents seem to be more talkative than in Havana.

"The majority of Cubans love Fidel," said a man named Luís.

The majority? Aren't all Cubans supposed to support Castro, he was asked. Luís didn't answer.

During Sunday Mass at his colonial-era church, where the green paint is peeling and parishioners drop little more than pennies in the woven-straw collection plates, a priest urged his flock to keep the faith.

"Faith gives strength. With faith you can overcome anything," he said.

After Mass, he said that although the day's message was already chosen before the news of Castro's health, it was appropriate for a time when the Cuban people seem confounded by the events and fearful to express their opinions on what the future may hold.

His parishioners, he said, have been expressing a broad range of emotions that run much deeper than simple concerns over Castro's health.

Some are happy to believe that Castro's illness will bring about change for the better, such as economic and political openings. Some are fearful of increased repression and outright war, the priest added.

Many believe that Raúl Castro is more brutal than his brother, he said. Raúl, who ordered scores of executions in this region after Castro-led guerrillas toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959, also has not appeared in public since last week.

"He should talk to the people," said a musician also named Raúl. But he added, "He knows they will not accept him. The people do not want him. The politicians don't want him. He's Fidel's brother, but he's not Fidel."

### **CHANGE IS NEEDED**

Like many other Cubans, the musician spoke in contradictory terms. On the one hand, he praised Fidel for providing basics like health and education and electricity. But he also adamantly expressed how hard it had become for average Cubans to afford something as basic as milk.

"Things have to change in Cuba," he said. "We cannot go on for another 50, 40 years like this."

The priest recalled that he was 8 years old when Castro's revolution began in Santiago.

"I remember the revolution well. . . . Then, the situation was very, very bad," he said. "I think there was a need for change back then. Many people in the beginning thought it was good."

But now, he and others want change.

His greatest fear, he added, is that it "could be a violent change. I hope not."