

Seize opportunity, Cuba's activists say

With the future of the government in doubt, Cuban activists took on a more vocal role, saying the people should grab control of their own fate.

BY NANCY SAN MARTIN
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After initial shock and relative silence following the stunning health crisis of Fidel Castro and temporary ceding of power to his brother, Cuban activists and government opponents on the island began speaking out more forcefully Monday, expressing a common assessment: Cuba will never be the same.

In a statement issued via e-mail, a group of dissidents' wives known as the Ladies in White spoke of an "inner fear" that "can be smelled, can be felt on the empty streets of Havana, and in cities and towns all over the country."

"It's as if everyone had come to a halt, astonished," said the statement written by Miriam Leiva, an activist whose husband was among 75 government opponents jailed during a 2003 crackdown. "We have felt the surveillance, and sensed the repressive elements preparing to act at the slightest signal.

"Cuba will never again be the same," the statement said. "The people deserve the right to express themselves without fear, to know what's happening, to contribute their opinions, to participate in the decisions, to really be the masters of their fate, to help our homeland to recover economically and join the international commonwealth."

IN THE DARK

Similar sentiments were expressed by other Cuban dissidents as the population remains in the dark over Castro's health and whether the temporary assumption of power by his brother Raúl will be permanent. Castro, who turns 80 on Sunday, and his 75-year-old brother have remained out of public view since the July 31 announcement.

In an interview with The Associated Press, prominent human rights activist Oswaldo Payá said that the Cuban leader's illness has exposed a one-ruler system and forced the population to face the possibility of a Cuba without Castro.

"This temporary absence has made people confront the real possibility of a new Cuba," Payá told the AP. "No one can claim that we'll be able to keep living in the same way. . . . This should be a moment of peace, of serenity. The time has come to really put our heads together."

As Castro opponents appealed for inclusion, supporters from around the world urged the United States to stay out of Cuban affairs.

A letter urging the United States not to intervene -- signed by 400 prominent left-leaning figures, such as former Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and activist Rigoberta Menchu of Guatemala -- was released in Havana on Monday.

The Bush administration has said it has no plans for an invasion.

FAILURE GUARANTEED

National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón warned that if there were an intervention attempt on the island by the United States, "it's going to become a hell for them from the first day."

"We will guarantee them total failure once again," Alarcón added in an interview from Havana with Telesur, a Venezuela-based television station, in a reference to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961.

He also said the Cuban population must trust Castro "in his discipline to rest now that he has to do it, to get better as soon as possible."

Roberto Fernández Retamar, a well-known Cuban writer and a member of the Council of State, said: "In a few months, we'll have [Castro] back with us."

Since the health crisis was announced, Havana has promoted a sense of normalcy and political stability, an image Retamar also tried to reinforce.

"Fidel is not at the helm of Cuba and there has been no chaos to overpower the Cuban people," Retamar said. "This has produced a peaceful succession."

In Granma, the Communist Party newspaper, Castro was compared to a *caguairan*, a tropical hardwood tree known in other parts of Latin America as a *quebracho*. The tree, known for its resistance and found in the eastern part of the island where Castro was born, "is incorruptible, compact, of extraordinary hardness," the newspaper said.