

# Cubans get an eyeful of Castro recuperating

Cubans tried to decipher the meaning behind new photos and a videotape of ailing leader Fidel Castro.

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AP PHOTO / GRANMA

**CASTRO CARICATURE:** Fidel Castro, in bed, meets with Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, center and interim Cuban President Raul Castro on Sunday.

**HAVANA** - Cubans crowded newsstands Monday for a closer look at a new and more downbeat batch of photos of ailing leader Fidel Castro -- this time showing him confined to a bed even as he greets friend and ally Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

The seven new photos published in Cuba's leading Granma newspaper and a video of Castro came one day after the smaller Juventud Rebelde on Sunday ran the first photos of Castro since his intestinal surgery, apparently sitting on a chair.

But Monday's images showed Castro lying in a hospital bed, looking tired and with sheets covering him to his torso. The government later released a 10-minute video of the Chávez meeting, dousing speculation about the photos' veracity.

For many Cubans, the latest images confirmed that the man who has ruled them for 47 years was still alive, but did little to ease their anxiety over a future without him.

On Sunday, a foreboding message from Castro cautioned that while he was continuing to recover, risks remained and Cubans should be ready for "adverse news."

"A lot of people were surprised to see [the photos] because they thought he was dead," a young man named Alexi told The Miami Herald, adding that he would "adapt" to whatever comes. "Nobody is eternal."

"He's getting better, that's good," said a store clerk named Yanine. "But a lot of people wish he'd die."

## MEANING OF PHOTOS

Given the careful cultivation of Castro's image throughout his rule, it remained unclear whether the new pictures of the bedridden leader meant that his health had weakened after the the first batch was taken, or he's exaggerating his ailment in order to stage a more triumphant comeback.

Castro, who turned 80 on Sunday, is recovering from surgery for intestinal bleeding due to undisclosed causes. U.S. specialists have said such bleeding could be the result of a half-dozen ailments, including an ulcer or cancer.

The pictures released Sunday and Monday offered no medical clues: There was no evidence of Castro connected to any tubes or other devices, such as intravenous bags.

The new set of photos appeared to have been shot in the same white room as the previous set, although Castro now lay in a hospital-type bed to the right of the normal bed shown in Sunday's photos. The two-bed arrangement is usual for Cubans who like to sleep next to their loved ones in hospitals.

### **LOCATION UNKNOWN**

A wall outlet similar to those seen in hospitals for oxygen and other hookups can be seen in one of the photos. Heavy tree branches showing through a window indicate the room is not a ground-floor room. The Cuban government has never identified Castro's hospital.

All the photos show Castro with a bedsheet covering him from around mid-torso down. He wears a bright red shirt, Chávez's signature color, emblazoned with the Venezuelan and Cuban flags and the words "Venezuela-Cuba." Chávez, the Venezuelan president, also wears a red shirt. Also in some of the photos is Defense Minister Raúl Castro, the younger brother who Castro anointed as his temporary replacement two weeks ago.

Oddly, on a nightstand to the left of the hospital bed are a pair of foot-high dolls of Castro and Chávez, similar to bobble-heads.

### **MOOD OF THE PEOPLE**

Throughout Castro's convalescence, the government appears to have been operating normally, though the population's mood has been described by foreigners as dark, confused and anxious over the future.

Raúl Castro's appearance in the photographs -- also a first since he assumed control -- may signal that he will assume a more active and visible role.

Whether Castro resumes control or Raúl remains in power, some Cubans said they don't expect much to change, while others expressed fears of the reputedly heavy-handed Raúl. But it's difficult to decipher real sentiments in a country where criticizing the government can land people in jail.

"People are afraid about the future," a baker named Denis told The Miami Herald. "They don't know what will happen next. People are afraid of change.

"The people chant revolutionary slogans on the street, but they complain in private at home," he added.

Fernando, who was buying a lunch of rice, beans and a piece of meat, said it is a delicate time for Cuba. "The American government will try to take advantage of any weakness, pushed by the Cubans in Miami," he said. "We must be careful."

Copies of Monday's edition of Granma were selling quickly, as Cubans swarmed newsstands. On Sunday, few people seemed to be aware of the photos published by Juventud Rebelde.

In an article accompanying the photographs under the headline *An Unforgettable Afternoon Among Brothers*, Granma reported that Castro and Chávez shared "more than three hours of emotional exchange, anecdotes, laughs, photos, gifts, a frugal snack and the happiness of close friendship."

The video of the encounter, which aired on Cuban television Monday night, showed Chávez and Raúl doing most of the talking, but Castro is heard in the background laughing and saying a few hard-to-decipher words.

### **PRAISE FROM CHAVEZ**

Granma quoted Chávez, Castro's closest political ally and economic supporter, as expressing wonderment over Castro's toughness in the face of his health crisis.

"What kind of human being is this?" Chávez reportedly asked. "What material is it made of?"

Granma's lead front-page photo showed Chávez and Raúl standing at Castro's bedside. All three smiled as Chávez and Castro held the edges of a large portrait of the Cuban leader. The newspaper said it was a gift from Raúl to Chávez.

The newspaper described the visit as "unforgettable, shared by brothers linked by blood and cause, which brought renewed strength and encouragement to the Comandante, bloodied in a thousand battles and seeking a new victory for life."

In Washington, White House spokesman Tony Snow sidestepped a question about whether "adverse news for Cuba" would be "good news for the White House."

"We'll have to find out. I mean, heaven knows," Snow said.

Drew Blakeney, spokesman for the U.S. diplomatic mission in Havana, said the Cubans' reaction to the photographs fell into three main categories:

"One being fear of and uncertainty about a future without the leader," Blakeney told The Miami Herald via e-mail. "After all, most have known nothing else, and all their lives have been deprived of information about the outside world. Their fears have been shaped and stoked by a lifetime of propaganda."

"Another common reaction is frustration that the long nightmare continues," Blakeney said. "Finally, some people feel genuine affection and sympathy for the leader."

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