

AMID UNCERTAINTY ABOUT LEADERSHIP, NO CUBAN EXODUS

As Castro's health improves, confusion is prompting many Cubans to put off plans to leave.

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CAIBARIEN, CUBA – The beach here is not impressive. The waters are choppy, the sand dirty, the boardwalk narrow. But these are not Caibarien's main draw. One hundred and fifty miles east of Havana, and about the same distance from Florida, this is a beach for the dreamers and the desperate - and those in between - who look out across the gulf, see a better life, and set off to live it.

Thousands of Cubans risk all to attempt to cross the sea and reach the US every year - and the small fishing town of Caibarien, surrounded by mangrove-covered cays where boats can lurk and hide, is where many of their journeys begin. Some of the so-called *balseros*, or rafters, die at sea. Many are intercepted en route, returned to the island, and fined or even sent to jail. But those who physically reach the shores of America, can - thanks to the so-called "wet foot/dry foot" policy - stay.

When Cuban President Fidel Castro temporarily transferred power to his brother Raúl two weeks ago due to illness, some observers predicted an exodus of *balseros* taking advantage of the uncertainty of the moment, and making a dash for US shores. And there was talk that Washington was considering relaxing its immigration policies to accommodate this.

But while in the past the flow of *balseros* has tended to wax and wane as much in accordance with political and economic changes as with the tides, this time nothing has happened. Traffic at Caibarien, and reportedly also at other popular crossing points such as Santa Cruz del Norte and Bahia Honda, seems to have actually slowed.

Cmdr. Jeff Carter of the US Coast Guard, which patrols the water between Cuba and Florida, told the Associated Press last week that there were no signs of any increase in crossings.

Meanwhile, Washington has encouraged this trend, maintaining its same immigration rules, and suggesting to Cubans they remain and work for change on the communist-ruled island - not try to flee.

"Now is the time to lay low," says Jaime, a bicycle-taxi driver in Caibarien who moonlights as a rowboat operator, ferrying *balseros* out to the cays to meet up with the speedboats that come from the other direction to pick them up.

"This town has basically shut down until we know what is happening," he says, talking out of the side of his mouth and asking, like others interviewed for this piece, not to be identified by his last name.

Throughout Cuba, there remains an almost eerie calm in place, as people go about their business as if not hearing much of anything from the only leader many have ever known in their lifetime is perfectly normal. There has been, since the July 31st announcement that Castro was severely ill and would undergo surgery, almost no reliable information about what is going on behind the scenes.

Photos of Castro published

Cuba's state-run Granma newspaper released new photographs of Castro on Monday, a day after the leader's 80th birthday. The photos show him in bed during a visit with his 75-year-old younger brother Raúl and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. These photos were published a day after Communist Youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde published the first images of Castro seen since the announcement.

Fidel has temporarily ceded powers to Raúl, the defense minister and No. 2 in the government.

Chávez's visit came the same day Castro issued a statement to the Cuban people, warning them that he faces a long and difficult recovery after his surgery.

No opposition protests

During this time there has been no opposition awakening, no calls for democratic change, no outburst or protests - and no rush to the beaches.

The sense of complacency, though, is deceiving, says Rocco, a waiter in the nearby town of Sancti Spiritus. Cubans, he says, who are accustomed to living in a vacuum of information but not used to the vacuum of leadership, are more nervous and confused than anything else, and that is what explains the paralysis.

Moreover, he adds, pointing out security men in spaces an outsider's eye would simply skim by, police and military vigilance is high. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, the government's neighborhood watch groups, have increased its volunteer night patrols and the Rapid Action Brigades, a pro-government civilian group used in the past to handle civil disturbances, remained on standby.

A 'new ball game'

"Now is not the time to make a big move," he says. "This is a new ball game, and we do not know how to play yet."

Rocco is a *balsero* in waiting. His voyage, in fact, had been all set.

A close friend in Florida made the arrangements. The speedboat coming to pick him and seven others up had been commissioned, money had been loaned, a date had been selected, a safe house in Caibarien picked out, and all that was left was to wait for the coded phone call to come in.

"The present has arrived," was what they would say, and Rocco would know what to do.

But instead, that very night, came the unexpected announcement of transference of power to Raúl Castro - and the journey was aborted. The man's voice on the other end of the line apologized: "My wife," it said, "...can't bring the present."

Since then, Rocco has not received any other calls. Instead, he has gone to work as usual. And at night, as usual, he has returned to the two-room apartment he shares with his mother and done all the usual things.

He watches the *telenovelas*, or soap operas, he smokes cigarettes out on the porch, and he chats to his mother about her days at the local fish cannery. In the mornings, as usual, she makes him fresh mango juice, and in the middle of the nights, she calls out to him to make sure he has brought the dog in. She does not know about his imminent journey.

Rocco knows his departure will break his mother's heart, but he cannot let that stop him, he says plainly.

"It's not even about politics," he stresses. "It's about having things. And doing things. It's about freedom."

He smiles at the cliché, but then repeats it: "It's freedom."

"Even if 'he' dies," says Rocco, whispering even though he is in his own room and there is no one around, "...and even if there is some change coming ... it will not be enough change for me."

By Sunday, photos of Castro recuperating were published for the first time, making it clear he had not died.

Also Sunday, Raul Castro made his first public appearance as president, welcoming visiting Chávez to Cuba and promising to follow the communist path loyally.

"I am leaving in any case. Maybe not this week, but soon," says Rocco. "I am a Cuban and Cubans have patience."

Over at the Caibarien beach, the sun goes down, and the place looks deserted.

A group of young boys, their scrawny legs sticking out of too-big swimming trunks, finish up their day's work, building a little castle in the sand.