

Video of frail Castro sobers Cubans

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HAVANA - The government video of a weakened Fidel Castro convalescing in bed brought home a growing awareness to many Cubans on Tuesday that neither he nor the country will likely be the same again.

The images released Monday night of Cuba's 80-year-old "unconquerable commander in chief" reassured anxious Cubans that he was alive, comfortable and recovering after surgery.

But the post-surgery photographs and video also are helping Cubans "gradually grow accustomed to" the idea of a Cuba without their "Maximum Leader" at the helm, according to historian Manuel Cuesta-Morua, a government opponent.

"The video gives a positive idea, that he is recovering," said Cuesta-Morua, who describes himself as a social democrat who wants more civil liberties in Cuba. "At the same time, it gives me the impression that he doesn't have the ability to return to his duties."

With the details of Castro's illness being treated as a "state secret," Cubans and the world are in the dark about how sick he really is, what ails him, and what kind of surgery he had two weeks ago before announcing July 31 he was temporarily ceding power to his younger brother Raul.

Cubans have remained calm while awaiting further word from the Communist Party, which has called on them to remain faithful to their leader and his revolution.

"Get well, Comandante," Rolando Alfonso Borges, a Communist Party Central Committee member wrote Tuesday in Granma, the party's newspaper. "You know that our people are the guarantor, that the Revolution came to stay, that we would defend it with blood and fingernails if necessary."

But Cubans have never before seen Castro as fragile as he looked Monday night on the 10-minute video broadcast on state television, which showed him receiving

an 80th birthday visit Sunday from his brother Raul and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

The man who ruled Cuba for 47 years before stepping aside didn't once lift his head from the adjustable bed, its back propped at an angle. His long fingers rested in the hand of Chavez, who treated him with the affection of a son for his father.

After returning to the Venezuelan capital on Tuesday, Chavez said that even though there was "still risk" involved, Castro's post-surgery outlook was "much improved." He noted Castro was now eating normally after several days of being fed intravenously.

"I returned much more at ease," Chavez said. "The truth is we were very worried about Fidel, who is so valuable to us and to all countries fighting for their dignity, for justice."

Previously, Castro's most vulnerable moment came during an accidental fall in October 2004 that shattered his left kneecap and broke his right arm. Cubans were stunned to see him shortly afterward in a wheelchair, then more astonished a few weeks later when he began walking again.

Seeing Castro convalescing elicited profound feelings of sympathy and even affection among many Cubans who seem to consider him part of their family, even if they don't always agree with him.

"We were so sad without knowing anything for so long" about Castro's condition, said Coralina Bauta, 59, who works in Old Havana. "But this made me happy."

"He looks sick, I think his recovery is going to take some while," 43-year-old driver Manuel Gonzalez said Tuesday. "He needs a lot of recovery time."

Privately, Cubans said that even if he recovers and reassumes the presidency, the bearded former guerrilla, famous for staying up all night and micromanaging multiple projects, will have to adopt a less rigorous schedule and learn how to delegate.

