

Castro says worst is behind him, but he still faces a 'prolonged' recovery

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Cuban leader Fidel Castro says the worst of his health crisis is behind him, although he lost 41 pounds in the 34 days since he fell ill and still faces a "prolonged" recovery.

"It can be affirmed that the most critical moment has been left behind," Castro said in a statement published in today's issue of the Cuban Communist Party's Granma newspaper. "Today, I recover at a satisfactory pace."

Castro temporarily ceded power to his brother Raúl on July 31, saying he had surgery for an unspecified intestinal illness that caused sustained bleeding. The state of his health has been reserved as a state secret, fueling rumors that he suffers from a variety of diseases, including cancer.

In his statement, he asked for the Cuban people not to blame anyone for the secrecy that he asked government leaders to observe.

The statement was accompanied by a series of photos showing a slimmer pajama-clad Castro reading and writing. Castro appears in the shots wearing two different sets of pajamas, one dark blue, another light. Only one shows a full-length image, showing him wearing slippers and reading in a rocking chair.

In one photo, Castro holds up what appears to be a proof of the book *One Hundred Hours With Fidel* written by Ignacio Ramonet. Castro promises the book will be published soon. However, the book was launched in April in Spain, and came under criticism when some of the words from alleged interviews turned out to have been taken verbatim from Castro speeches.

Castro also says he recently had his last surgical stitch removed, and expects to be receiving visitors soon. Cuba is hosting the Non Aligned Movement summit next week.

"At this moment, I am not in any hurry, and no one should hurry," he wrote. "The country marches on well and moves ahead."