

Castro's health not top topic at U.S. base

U.S. military men and women at Guantánamo worry more about the Middle East than Cuba even after the recent transition from Fidel to Raúl Castro.

The Miami Herald
Sep. 05, 2006

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba -- Try ordering a mojito at the "Cuban Club" here and the waitress offers a curious stare.

This U.S. base sits on Cuban soil, but far from the island's mind-set.

When Fidel Castro handed power to his brother Raúl on July 31, there was far more commotion in Miami than here. "From our perspective, it was business as usual throughout the whole thing," said Navy Capt. Mark Leary, base commander.

The sharp political rhetoric between Washington and Havana, including allegations of Cuban government harassment of the U.S. Interests Section in the Cuban capital, does not resonate at Guantánamo. Leary holds a monthly meeting with his Cuban counterpart -- an orderly ritual that has gone on for about a decade as a way of ensuring that the 17.4-mile fenced border remains calm.

At the most recent meeting with Cuban Navy Capt. Pedro Román Cisneros last month, "there was nothing brought up about Castro's health or anything like that," Leary said.

"I thought if it was going to be brought up, it was going to be brought up by the Cubans," Leary said.

It wasn't. Instead, the military men followed their typical "very pragmatic, very practical" dialogue about issues like construction projects near the fence.

A few weeks earlier, the two nations' militaries held their annual joint mass-casualty fire drill. Helicopters from Cuba put out fires on the American side, and U.S. doctors simulated medical responses on the Cuban side of the northeast gate, which separates the U.S. base from the rest of Cuba.

The U.S. Navy's post-Castro immigration-control plan was not altered by the news about the power changeover either, Leary said.

"We had actually been reviewing it," he said. "It's continually reviewed."

U.S. soldiers were scheduling an organized run along the border, one of the rare instances when they give the communist portion of the island much consideration.

The northeast gate doesn't offer much distinction -- a few guard towers, an empty office, flags and lots of unkempt greenery. The base keeps its garbage at a nearby dump, so a flock of turkey vultures is never far. The only note of provocation is a sign on the Cuban guardhouse, in large black letters in Spanish: "Republic of Cuba, free territory of America."

Indeed, Cuba seems a lot farther from here than the Middle East.

"I think it's in the back of people's minds," said Lacy Hicks, a Petty Officer 1st Class in the Navy who has been writing for *The Wire*, a community newspaper for soldiers. "Does it affect our mission? I don't think so."

Television sets in military mess halls hum cable news, alternating American crime stories with updates from Lebanon. Copies of the newspaper *Stars and Stripes* carry headlines about the troops in Iraq, where many soldiers have friends deployed or have been fighting themselves.

When Fidel Castro ceded power, one army captain on the base said he took bets on the chances that the strongman was dead. Ordinary U.S. soldiers considered the prospect of an open Cuba as mainly a place to go party, said Jim Morales, a security consultant based at Guantánamo.

"They're here, isolated on the base, with nowhere to go," Morales said.

Of course, that hasn't always been the case. The United States has operated the base since 1903, when a lease was signed. Now, many of the 7,500 military and civilian workers are doing jobs related to the detention of about 450 men captured by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere.

In the mid-1990s, the mission was different. The base held thousands of Cuban migrants interdicted at sea by the Coast Guard.

Now, at least 50 Cuban refugees are held at the migrant operations center, on the "slow" side of the island. Some work as bag boys at the military commissary, but they cannot move around, socialize freely or buy alcohol. Leary said he is trying to increase their entertainment options.

"It's pretty restrictive," he said.