

Weak Castro in new video

Ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro was seen in new videos and still photos, looking a bit heavier but still weak.

The MiamiHerald
Jan. 31, 2007

Cuban state television on Tuesday broadcast a brief new video of ailing leader Fidel Castro. He looked heavier than in his last video, issued three months ago, but remained weak, mumbling and short of breath.

Cuban TV said the video was shot during a previously unannounced visit by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who in the closing moments said he was speaking at 3 p.m. Monday after meeting Castro for two hours.

The images were the first of Castro, 80, since late October, and only the third video of him made public since July 31, when he ceded power to his brother Raúl after "complicated" surgery for intestinal bleeding. Today is exactly six months after that announcement.

Havana has labeled Castro's medical status a "state secret," but published reports have said he suffered complications and infections following the surgery that left the man who ruled Cuba for 47 years with a "very grave prognosis."

Monday's video was apparently designed to show that he was improving, though the images left many questions unanswered. Only about three minutes of the six-minute video included Castro, while the rest focused on Chávez's arrival, his comments and some still photos of his meeting with Fidel.

"This also is far from being a lost battle," Castro said of his current health problems, according to The Associated Press.

He noted that when his severe intestinal problems struck last summer he was still not fully recovered from a devastating October 2004 fall that severely injured a knee and a shoulder. "One after the other," Castro said of his health troubles.

Later in the video, Chávez was even more optimistic, saying Castro had already won the battle to recover his health.

videos previously released, Castro wore a track suit in Cuba's red, white and blue national colors, zipped up to his neck. He was shown only from the chest up, with no view of his midsection, but his face seemed fuller than in previous images.

He stood in most of the images, but at one point he seemed to be reclining on a high chair. He mumbled some of his words and seemed to gasp for air between sentences, and overall appeared frail and still ailing.

After shots of Chávez arriving in Cuba and being met plane-side by Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, the video showed the Venezuelan president greeting Castro as "the Caesar of dignity" and saying he brought the Cuban leader "the embrace of millions."

The next scenes showed Castro and Chávez chatting, and the following scene showed the visitor alone, saying that he had found his host "in good humor, looking good, in good spirits, with a lot of clarity." He said they discussed several topics, including what Chávez called the world "energy crisis."

Castro at one point read a headline from a printout of an Internet article about the environment dated Saturday from the Argentine newspaper Clarín.

The final part of the video showed still photos of the meeting and finally a photo of Chávez apparently being seen off at a Havana airport by Cuba's new interim leader, Raúl Castro.

Chávez's first two known visits to Fidel Castro after his surgery, in August and September, resulted in the release of still photos and a video of their meeting, underlining the importance that Cuba places on its relations with the leftist Venezuelan leader.

The latest comments from Cuban officials on Castro's health had pointed toward a slow but steady recovery, despite U.S. predictions that he was seriously ill and had months, not years, to live.

Cubans watching the video being shown repeatedly on the nightly television news as they sat in open cafes and restaurants in Old Havana said the images reassured them about Castro's health, the AP reported.

"He looks a lot better now," said 28-year-old law student Nicolás Fernández, who predicted Castro would live another 12 years. "I think it was a positive video. He's well; strong of mind and body."