

Castro no-show raises health questions

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro was a no-show on May Day, missing his third straight major public event and disappointing hundreds of thousands of marchers who were forced to settle for an appearance by his stodgy younger brother and a message in the form of a wandering essay about ethanol.

Top officials in Cuba and throughout the region have long insisted that the island's "maximum leader" is recuperating from emergency intestinal surgery, and has even reassumed some of the duties he left when he temporarily stepped aside on July 31.

But nine months and counting without a public appearance has some wondering whether repeated assurances that Castro's health is improving are aimed more at reassuring the 80-year-old patient and his supporters than accurately depicting his condition.

And, even if Castro is no longer at death's door, will he ever be well enough to be seen in public again - much less be up to running a country?

"We are still where we were," said Wayne Smith, the former head of the American mission in Havana. "They say his recovery is satisfactory. But all these months later he cannot even make an appearance on May Day."

Smith said that it "now seems more unlikely than before that he will fully resume the presidency."

"And the more time that passes, the more unlikely it seems," he added.

Tuesday marked just the third time since leading the Cuban revolution in January 1959 that Castro missed his country's sweeping International Workers' Day festivities, where a sea of marchers in red and white T-shirts flooded Havana's Revolution Plaza.

But it was also the third big event Castro has missed since last summer, when he announced his illness and ceded power to a caretaker government led by his brother Raul, the 75-year-old defense minister.

It was Raul who presided over the Nonaligned Summit in September and a major military parade - that doubled as a late celebration of Fidel's 80th birthday - in December.

Wearing his typical olive-green uniform, the younger Castro was the reluctant center of attention again Tuesday, standing stiffly and smiling on a platform beneath a towering statute of Cuban independent leader Jose Marti.

He occasionally waved as marchers streamed past, clutching plastic Cuban flags, portraits of both Castro brothers and banners denouncing U.S. "imperialism." They protested the recent decision to free on bond anti-communist militant Luis Posada Carriles, pending his trial on U.S. immigration charges. Havana accuses the Cuban-born Posada of orchestrating a 1976 airliner bombing that killed 73 people - a charge he denies.

Signs and banners everywhere Tuesday demanded "Prison for the Executioner" and accused the U.S. government of a double standard on terrorism in the Posada case.

Marchers also clamored for the release of five Cuban spies imprisoned in the U.S. for being unregistered foreign agents, calling them heroes who were merely protecting their country from violent exile groups.

Cuba's top union leader Salvador Valdes signaled at the start of Tuesday's festivities that Castro wasn't coming.

"A speedy recovery and lots of health, dear Fidel," Valdes said.

Castro has looked on his way to recovery - appearing stronger in recent photos and videos released by government news outlets - and his close friend and ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, said Sunday that he was "back in charge."

But Castro released a rambling and seemingly off-topic statement Monday night, his fourth in recent weeks which laid into a U.S. plan to use food crops to produce ethanol for American cars. He spent more words dismissing a perceived growing feud between himself and the leftist government of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva than May Day.

Although Cuban life is little changed under Raul, loyalists missed the energy Fidel brought to events like May Day.

"Everyone wanted to see him, but it's good that he recovers completely. Now the revolution is continuing with Raul," said 68-year-old hotel worker Victor Reyes, who was among the marchers.

Phil Peters, Cuba specialist for the Lexington Institute, a Washington-area think tank, said Castro could still make a public appearance soon - but one that doesn't revolve around an hours-long parade in the hot morning sun.

"My guess is that, given how long it has been, that his first appearance would be indoors," Peters said.

Whether Castro appears soon in public or not, the question seems to be less pressing for some Cubans than it once was - as the idea of major events without their former leader sinks in further.

"He is not here at the Plaza," worker Gloria Neme said Tuesday, "but he's present here in our hearts."