

Castro's health remains a mystery

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro's health and his role in Cuba's future remained a mystery Tuesday after the ailing communist leader failed to appear at a massive parade celebrating International Workers' Day.

Instead, Castro's designated stand-in, his 75-year-old brother, Raúl, joined other key leaders atop a reviewing stand in Havana's Revolution Square, waving occasionally as tens of thousands of Cubans carrying flags and banners marched past.

"A speedy recovery and lots of health, dear Fidel," Salvador Valdes, secretary general of Cuba's central workers union, told the crowd, drawing cheers of "Viva Fidel."

Castro, 80, has not appeared in public since last July, when he turned over power to his brother and told the Cuban people he was undergoing treatment for a serious health problem.

The exact details of his illness have remained a closely guarded state secret, although speculation centers upon diverticular disease, a weakening of the colon walls in which blood can leak into the body cavity. The condition is often fatal among the elderly.

Cuba has remained calm during Castro's nine-month absence, dashing hopes among many Cuban exiles in the United States that his faltering health might spark a crisis and a sudden change in Cuba.

Raúl Castro, longtime head of Cuba's military, has not broken dramatically with his brother's policies, although he has criticized the inefficiencies and filching endemic to Cuba's socialist economy while calling for a debate over the island's future.

He has also publicly declared that Cuba is willing to open negotiations with the United States, which has enforced a trade embargo against the tiny island for most of the past four decades. The Bush administration has largely ignored the comments, and in recent years has tightened the embargo and cut off all senior level contacts with Cuba, analysts say.

Fidel Castro's failure to appear at the May Day event seems likely to spark a new round of speculation about Cuba's future and whether Castro will ever return to power full-time.

Last December, Castro missed a belated birthday celebration, prompting some American intelligence officials to speculate that he was near death. Videos released by Cuban state television last fall showed a weak and unsteady Castro reading newspapers or meeting with friends.

Castro has appeared stronger in more recent clips, even conducting some official state business, stoking speculation that he might return to public life.

Bolivia's leftist President Evo Morales, a staunch Castro ally, told reporters this week that he believed Castro would appear at the May Day parade.

Instead, Cuba's 11 million people were left to wonder, again, whether the elder Castro's 47 years of rule are drawing to a close.

"We feel a little sad that he isn't here, but we understand he needs to rest and recuperate," said Belkys Mendoza, 42, who marched in the parade. "But we're all here to honor him, and his spirit continues to lead us in the revolution."