

Despite absence, Castro's influence seen on May Day

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Cuban leader Fidel Castro, recovering from a serious intestinal ailment, missed Havana's May Day parade for the first time in decades Tuesday but still managed to set the political themes for the workers' march that drew about 500,000 people.

Galvanized by his suggestions for banners and slogans in an editorial carried by all major Cuban media, the marchers denounced the Bush administration for releasing an accused terrorist from a New Mexico jail last month and criticized the United States for using food crops to produce fuel.

The bearded revolutionary's place on the parade reviewing stand in Revolution Plaza was filled by his brother Raúl, Cuba's defense minister who has served as provisional head of state and chief of the Communist Party during the president's intestinal surgeries and convalescence.

But Cuban media described Raúl Castro as the second secretary of the party and made no reference to his temporary role as president, bolstering a message that Cuban and allied officials have been putting out in recent weeks that Fidel Castro is back in power.

Now 80, Castro has not been seen in public since late July, when he handed over his governing responsibilities before undergoing the first of a reported three operations. Photographs and some carefully choreographed video have been released over the nine months he's been absent, the more recent images showing a somewhat rejuvenated and animated leader meeting with friends and visiting dignitaries.

Castro had missed only two May Day marches during his 48 years in power. His return to the leadership Tuesday had been anticipated by many because Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez had insisted a day earlier that Fidel Castro was again "in charge" of the Cuban government. Another close ally, Bolivian President Evo Morales, had said over the weekend that Castro would use the occasion to resume the presidency. Cuban officials were more equivocal.

This year's address to the Havana march was delivered by union chief Salvador Valdes and lasted only eight minutes, a far cry from the four-hour discourses customary of Castro.

The editorial posted by Cuban news media late Monday, titled "It is imperative to have an immediate energy revolution, reflections by President Fidel Castro," bore all the hallmarks of the leader's traditionally verbose, didactic speeches. He lashed out at population growth, global warming, the U.S. use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the threat of a return to slave-like work conditions if Latin Americans try to fulfill the United States' "insatiable" need for energy by growing crops for biofuels.

Castro calculated that a cane-cutter would have to make 36,000 flexing motions with his legs, carry 800 armloads of sugar cane from field to truck and walk more than five miles to fulfill the daily cutting quota needed to meet U.S. demands.

While a few marchers took up the call for criticizing ethanol production, most of the banners condemned Washington for allowing terror suspect Luis Posada Carriles to walk free pending an immigration fraud trial.

Venezuela and Cuba have been trying to extradite the 79-year-old Cuban exile to stand trial for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner in which all 73 on board died. He also is wanted in connection with a string of tourist hotel bombings in Cuba in the late 1990s.