

Chavez says Castro has his fastball back

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HAVANA --

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said Wednesday that his mentor and friend Fidel Castro has "recovered his fastball," but needs more time to warm up before returning to the game.

Chavez met with the convalescing Castro for six hours behind closed doors during a surprise visit to Cuba's capital. He said the pair usually talk for an average of seven or eight hours and could have gone longer during their chat Tuesday, but that it was "enough already."

"I can tell you that he has recovered his fastball of 90 miles an hour," Chavez said as he discussed the improving health of his 80-year-old friend, who was a baseball pitcher as a young man.

Addressing a group of top Cuban government leaders and students from Havana and Venezuela, Chavez later said of Castro, "He has his uniform hanging near him and he's peeking at it, but he's still warming up his arm."

"He's not yet ready to take the diamond," he said.

Chavez then told a joke implying that Castro's brother Raul, Cuba's 75-year-old acting president, might someday have to defer to his fully recovered sibling. The Venezuelan president said the younger Castro would be forced from the pitcher's mound to first or second base, but quickly added of Raul "his fastball is strong and hard and so is his curve."

Chavez, who has vowed to steer his own country toward socialism but denies following the model of communist Cuba, has visited Fidel Castro more than any other foreign leader since his friend fell gravely ill last summer. He called Castro his father Wednesday, joking that "I think he's even Raul's father."

Fidel Castro has not been seen in public since July 31, when he announced he had gone emergency intestinal surgery and was handing over power to a provisional government headed by Raul, Cuba's defense minister. There had been speculation he could make a surprise appearance Wednesday to listen to Chavez.

In his absence, Chavez, 52, assured the crowd that Castro was watching from afar, saying "for me, it's not easy to come to a public event in Havana without Fidel."

He added later that Castro's "almost complete recovery" gives him "a sensation of relief, a sensation of much joy and optimism."

Recovering in an undisclosed location, Castro's exact condition and ailment are state secrets. In recent weeks he has penned a series of essays, and the gray bearded leader looked strong and animated during an interview with Cuban state television last week.

Chavez said that during his meeting with Castro, the pair discussed clean energy alternatives to combat global warming and the possibility of building a plant in Cuba to refine natural gas shipped from Venezuela. Chavez's government already has helped spur economic growth in Cuba by selling the island oil at favorable prices.

Before addressing those assembled, Chavez burst from his front-row seat to sing with a performing choir. Throwing his arms around two singers and swaying to the beat, he looked happy if out-of-place in a long-sleeve red shirt that clashed with the tan uniforms of the performers.

Chavez beckoned until Raul Castro joined him on-stage, but the acting president looked far from comfortable and did not sing.

Earlier, both Chavez and Raul Castro attended the dedication of a statue to Venezuelan independence hero Francisco de Miranda, which was officially unveiled at the eastern end of the Malecon waterfront facing Havana Bay.

Foreign reporters were not invited, but state television broadcast the ceremony. Wearing thick sunglasses and his trademark olive fatigues, Raul Castro traded jokes with Chavez, but official microphones did not pick up what was said.