

Cuba mourns revolution's first lady

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HAVANA --

Acting President Raul Castro blinked back tears Tuesday as he placed a red rose before a portrait of his late wife, Vilma Espin Guillois, a guerrilla warrior and women's rights pioneer who was the first lady of the Cuban revolution.

Castro has governed the island for nearly 11 months while his brother Fidel recovers from intestinal surgery, but Espin, who died Monday at 77, was Cuba's most powerful woman for decades, campaigning for equality among the sexes in education, work and other aspects of life.

"She was a tremendous revolutionary, but also a tremendous women," said Sara Hurtado, a 58-year-old retired Havana health worker. "She was a role model for all the women in Cuba."

No cause of death was reported, but Espin was said to suffer from severe circulatory problems.

Flags flew at half mast as thousands lined up outside the towering white-marble Jose Marti monument on the capital's Revolution Plaza to file past a head-high black and white photo of Espin.

Arianna Patino, a 19-year-old Tourism Ministry worker, stood in line with her colleagues for two hours to pay her respects.

Of Espin's generation "there are fewer and fewer left," Patino said. "We, the young, will have to replace them."

Espin's death is a reminder that the dashing young rebels who built Cuba's communist system are nearing the end of their lives, opening an uncertain chapter in the nation's history.

It is likely to have a profound personal effect on the Castro brothers at a critical moment. Espin is the most important revolutionary figure to die since Celia Sanchez, another rebel fighter and Fidel's closest confidante, succumbed to cancer in 1980.

Raul Castro, Cuba's defense minister and an army general with a reputation as unflinching enforcer, is said to be very close to his family. His shoulders slumped, the 76-year-old looked deeply saddened during his brief appearance at Tuesday's memorial for his wife of 47 years, the mother of his four grown children.

Raul did not speak to reporters and there was no sign of the 80-year-old Fidel, who has not been seen in public since announcing in July that serious illness had forced him to step aside temporarily.

Formal tributes to Espin were held across the island of 11.2 million. Raul Castro, his children, and many of Cuba's other top leaders gathered again Tuesday night at Havana's Karl Marx theater, where they praised her work with immunization campaigns, work training programs for women, and her creation of preschool child-care centers for working mothers. Her brother-in-law Fidel was not there.

"She dedicated her life to liberating her fatherland," Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, a vice president and influential voice in the government for nearly five decades, said during a series of speeches and video tributes celebrating Espin's life. "She was the most loved, respected and admired of all Cuban women."

Espin asked that her ashes be placed in a mausoleum in eastern Cuba's Sierra Maestra mountains with the remains of other rebel fighters.

The daughter of a wealthy lawyer for the Bacardi rum distillery in the eastern city of Santiago, Espin trained as a chemical engineer in Cuba and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before joining street protests after a 1952 coup brought Fulgencio Batista to power.

She eventually assumed leadership of eastern Cuba's clandestine urban rebel movement, offering her house as its headquarters before seeking refuge in the mountains above Santiago, where the Castro brothers commanded their rebel fighters.

She and Raul Castro were married in April 1959, four months after Batista fled Cuba.

She helped found the Federation of Cuban Women, an influential organization with millions of members.

Because Fidel Castro was divorced, Espin became Cuba's low-key first lady, a role she maintained for more than 45 years, even after Fidel reportedly married Dalia Soto del Valle, with whom he is said to have five grown sons.