

Castro: If youth fail, everything will

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro reached out to Cuban youth on Sunday, warning that "If the young people fail, everything will fail" in an acknowledgment that motivating Cubans too young to remember his 1959 revolution is often a struggle.

New generations of Cubans, unlike the 80-year-old Castro and his gray-haired contemporaries, have no direct connection to the guerrilla uprising that toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista. Officials say their communist system will nonetheless long survive its founders - and little has changed on the island since Castro handed power to a provisional government headed by his brother while he recovers from a serious illness.

But these days, many young Cubans are more interested in access to the Internet, music, television and movies than upholding revolutionary ideals.

"None of you were alive when the Revolution triumphed," Castro wrote in a letter to the Communist Youth Union. "Its roots were sustained in every act of sacrifice and heroism of an admirable people, who knew how to confront all obstacles."

He went on to write: "If the young people fail, everything will fail. It is my profound conviction that the Cuban youth will fight to stop that. I believe in you."

Castro has not appeared in public for almost 11 months, since emergency intestinal surgery forced him to cede power to his 76-year-old brother Raul.

His letter, which appeared in the Communist Party youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* and was read on state-run television, came in response to an optimistic letter the youth union sent to their "Commander in Chief."

"The young people of this land believe, with profound conviction, in the free and sovereign future of Cuba; in the preservation of the work of art we built and the happiness of revolutionaries now and forever," the union wrote.

Many other young Cubans are unconvinced - and the government's answer has been the "Battle of Ideas," a catch-phrase for efforts to win them over through improvements in education, housing, health care and the everyday quality of life.

The program began by training troubled youths to be teachers and social workers and rebuilding dilapidated homes, schools and hospitals. It has since expanded to Cubans of all ages and includes efforts to improve hurricane tracking systems, train Olympic athletes and build multipurpose theaters in every town.

Damian Fernandez, a Cuban-American academic, says the initiative is an acknowledgment by the Cuban government that it needs to deliver tangible benefits.

"Symbolic politics aren't enough anymore," said Fernandez, head of the Cuban Research Institute at Miami's Florida International University. "Arroz and frijoles politics is what they need," he said.

Those "rice and beans" results include hundreds of refurbished medical facilities, thousands of new teachers and cultural offerings such as book and video clubs.

Still, it's not hard to find teenagers who say such things are not enough.

"The Battle of Ideas has nothing to do with change. It is the opposite," said Francisco Hernandez, a 22-year-old English major at the University of Havana who described Cuba's communism as "broken" and complained of gaping income gaps.

"Some people have money, some people can travel. Some people can live in big houses and eat in restaurants," he said in slow but near flawless English. "The rest of us can do none of that."

Other Cuban officials have acknowledged this frustration. Cabinet Secretary Carlos Lage said as much in April when he told communist youth leaders that the current system is "not as ideal as the one we wished for, or achieved years ago."

"We always knew the biggest challenge ... is to instill in young people a communist conscience and rejection of capitalism, without having lived in it, without having seen the moral damage it produces," Lage said.

Luis Fernandez, a finance director at Havana's Fructuoso Rodriguez Orthopedic Hospital, said he is grateful that his 60-year-old facility was among 84 hospitals and 500 clinics renovated as part of the Battle of Ideas. On a recent Saturday, patients filled the air-conditioned waiting room and many areas still smelled of new paint, though the power flickered.

"It was terrible here before," he said. "There were almost no windows, the electric system practically didn't work."

But a lack of basic freedoms outweigh benefits like free university education, said Maria, a philosophy student at the University of Havana who feared getting thrown out of school if her surname was published.

"Battle of Ideas? That's just politics," said the 18-year-old. "It doesn't help us."