

Raúl Castro to give Revolution Day speech

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HAVANA --

Cuba announced Wednesday that interim leader Raúl Castro will give this week's Revolution Day address as the defense minister takes on more of his older brother Fidel's previous roles and consolidates a caretaker rule that increasingly looks permanent.

The announcement on the front page of the Communist Party daily Granma doused the few remaining hopes among Fidel Castro's ardent supporters that he could make a surprise appearance as the nation's leadership prepares to celebrate Revolution Day on Thursday.

Fidel Castro made his last public appearance at last year's July 26 celebration. Five days later, the elder Castro stunned the nation by announcing he had undergone emergency colon surgery and was provisionally ceding power to Raúl, his designated successor since early 1959.

The celebrations mark the July 26, 1953, armed attack on the Moncada military barracks in eastern Cuba that launched the revolution. Although the assault failed, and many militants died, the rebels went on to oust dictator Fulgencio Batista six years later.

Granma said that about 100,000 people will attend Raúl Castro's speech, starting early Thursday in the central-eastern provincial capital of Camaguey. The festivities will be carried live on state television and radio.

Although the ailing 80-year-old Fidel traditionally has presided over the annual Revolution Day celebration, Raúl has delivered the key July 26 addresses at least twice, most recently in 1997. Raúl, now 76, was at his brother's side during the barracks assault and accompanied him and other surviving attackers to prison.

Freed early under an amnesty the Castro brothers and their band traveled to Mexico to form a rebel army that later returned to Cuba's eastern Sierra Maestra mountains to wage a guerrilla war against the Batista government. The revolution triumphed on Jan. 1, 1959, after Batista fled the country.

Life on the island has been largely unaltered under a caretaker government led by Raúl, with the government occasionally issuing videos and photos documenting Fidel's recovery. Senior officials months ago stopped insisting that Castro will return to power.

Castro's exact ailment and condition remain state secrets, but he is believed to suffer from diverticular disease, which causes inflammation and bleeding of the colon. Castro has acknowledged that at least one of several surgeries went badly.