

Castro: Cash at root of boxer defections

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro suggested Monday that a two-time Cuban Olympic boxing champion and his teammate had defected, blaming their disappearance at the Pan American Games in Brazil on American money.

Castro hinted the boxers left the games to accept lucrative deals from international promoters, saying "there is a mafia" that uses "refined psychological methods and many millions of dollars" to "select, buy up and promote Cuban boxers in the international sports competitions."

Bantamweight Guillermo Rigondeaux, who won the 2000 and 2004 Olympics, and Erislandy Lara, a top welterweight, left the athletes village Sunday, failing to appear for their weigh-ins. They forfeited their bouts.

"They were simply knocked down with a blow straight to the chin, paid up with U.S. bills," Castro wrote in an essay distributed by e-mail.

The 80-year-old Cuban leader is recuperating from emergency intestinal surgery that forced him to step down in favor of a provisional government headed by his younger brother almost exactly a year ago. He recently has been penning essays known as "Reflections of the Commander in Chief" every few days.

Since the Athens Olympics, the Cuban program has been hit hard by defections, with several champions now fighting professionally in the United States and Europe.

Earlier, the Pan American Sports Organization requested the National Security Secretariat, which is in charge of security at the games, investigate the disappearance of the two Cuban boxers, said Marcelo de Paiva, the secretariat's press spokesman.