

Chávez vows to continue Castro's "struggle"

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CARACAS --

(AP) -- President Hugo Chávez promised his close friend and ally Fidel Castro on Thursday that he would continue the Cuban leader's decades-long fight against U.S. imperialism once the aging revolutionary icon has passed away.

"Fidel, I assume the commitment of continuing your struggle, your endless battle. I assume it. We, your children, assume it," said Chávez, a former paratroop commander who is steering Venezuela toward socialism.

Since taking office in 1999, Chávez has forged strong ties with communist-led Cuba while emerging as one of Latin America's most outspoken critics of Washington's foreign policy in the region.

Castro, who turns 81 next month, has not been seen in public since emergency intestinal surgery almost a year ago forced him to temporarily cede power to a provisional government headed by his younger brother.

Recuperating in an undisclosed location, the Cuban leader has looked stronger in recent official photographs and videos, but is apparently still too sick to appear in public. In April, he began penning essays known as "Reflections of the Commander in Chief" every few days.

Chávez has regularly offered updates on Castro's health. During his televised speech on Thursday, he praised his mentor for living life to the fullest despite his age.

"There's Fidel, soon he's going to turn 81 years old, fighting, living each day of his fruitful life intensely," Chávez said. "I know you are not going to leave yet. No, I know it."