

Raúl again offers 'olive branch' to U.S.

At the annual July 26 anniversary celebration to mark the start of the Cuban Revolution, interim leader Raúl Castro again called for dialogue with the U.S.

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In Raúl Castro's most important speech since he replaced ailing brother Fidel, the interim Cuban leader Thursday bluntly admitted during the island's July 26 celebrations that Cuba faces myriad problems and little hope of quick fixes.

Castro, 76, told the tens of thousands convened in the eastern city of Camagüey that while salaries and food production are too low, inefficiency and prices are way too high. He added that Cuba's days of inefficiency, graft and dependence on foreign imports must come to an end.

Castro, also for the third time, called for a dialogue with Washington and made only passing mention of Fidel -- whose absence at the ceremony marking the 54th anniversary of the start of the Cuban Revolution reinforced the belief that Fidel will not return to active rule after his emergency surgery for intestinal bleeding last July.

The flag-waving crowds chanted "*¡Ra-úl! Ra-úl!*," underscoring that an era had ended, and a new one begun.

Castro started his hour-long speech much as his brother would have: with attacks on the United States. He blasted the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba and the lack of visas issued to Cuban migrants, said Cuba's military was readier than ever for any U.S. intervention and held out hope that the next U.S. presidential elections will lead to better relations.

'FAILED POLICY'

"Whatever new administration emerges will have to decide if it will maintain the absurd, illegal and failed policy toward Cuba, or if it will accept the olive branch that we extended," he said. "If the new U.S. authorities finally put aside their arrogance and decide to talk in a civilized manner, they're welcome. If not, we are willing to continue confronting their policy of hostility, even for another 50 years, if that becomes necessary."

The Bush administration quickly dismissed Castro's offer of talks, as it has done after Castro's two previous offers.

"The only real dialogue that's needed is with the Cuban people," U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in Washington, according to The Associated Press. "If the Cuban people were able to express their opinion on the question of whether or not they would like to freely choose their leaders, the answer would be yes.

"Unfortunately that's not a dialogue that is taking place in Cuba at the moment."

July 26 marks the anniversary of Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago in 1953. It is commemorated each year as the start of the revolution.

It was long a signature affair for Fidel, who used it to launch hours-long rants on the evils of imperialism. His last public appearance was at last year's twin celebrations in the eastern cities of Bayamo and Holguín. Five days later, he announced he had undergone surgery and ceded power to Raúl.

FRAIL

Although he has not been seen in public since, the nearly 81-year-old Fidel has appeared somewhat recovered in recent photos and videos, though still too frail to return to full-time work.

"If he didn't come today, he's never coming," dissident journalist Ahmed Rodríguez said by telephone from Havana. "The entire country was expecting Fidel today. You can't create a nation around the image of one man -- Fidel -- and then after 47 years send in his brother."

The speech was a critical one for Raúl Castro, who has spent the past 12 months avoiding the limelight.

Andy Gómez, a senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies, said Castro blew the chance to lay out his domestic strategy: "It lacked vision, it lacked leadership and lacked any sense of direction where the Cuban Revolution will continue with him at the helm."

But Baruch College Latin American studies professor Ted Henken, who travels often to Cuba, said he was "in general . . . impressed with Raúl's confidence, sense of humor and energy. . . . He spent an inordinate amount of time talking about milk production, but did so with humor and data."

And the data is daunting.

Cuba will spend some \$340 million to import powdered milk next year, up from \$105 million three years ago, Castro said -- one of the food items that should be produced in Cuba "with tractors or oxen."

Henken noted that "He is almost openly calling for renovation and reform within the socialist system."