

Castro might not let boxers travel overseas

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro might bar Cuban boxers from competing in the world championships in Chicago and other qualifying events leading to the Beijing Olympics to prevent possible defections.

Castro wrote in a column published in official newspapers that two Cuban boxers who disappeared during the Pan American Games in Brazil last month only to be arrested and sent back to the island "had reached the point of no return" with the national boxing team.

"The athlete who abandons his delegation is not unlike the soldier who abandons his fellow men in the midst of combat," he said.

Guillermo Rigondeaux, Cuba's top boxer and a two-time Olympic bantamweight champion, and Erislandy Lara, an amateur welterweight world champion, arrived Sunday in Cuba. They were sent to state guest houses for more than two days, then released while the communist government decides what to do with them.

Rigondeaux returned to the Havana apartment he shares with his family Wednesday, saying he never intended to defect. Lara's family lives in the easternmost province of Guantánamo and could not be immediately located.

"I was always ready to return to the fatherland," Rigondeaux told The Associated Press at his apartment. "People didn't believe I would stay."

He called his disappearance in Brazil a moment of great "indiscipline" and said he supports Castro's Cuban revolution wholeheartedly: "I am very revolutionary."

The boxer's relatives said they never doubted he would return, painting his home and preparing to feast on a pig to celebrate his homecoming.

Castro said Cuban officials were compiling the list of fighters for the 2008 Olympics, a squad that was scheduled to compete in the amateur world championships in Chicago in October and two other qualifying events before heading to China.

"Just picture the mafia sharks lurking about in search of fresh meat," Castro wrote of would-be promoters who could try to persuade Cuban fighters to desert.

He said Cuban sports officials hoping to prevent defections are ``analyzing all possible alternatives, including the option of changing the list of boxers or of not sending any delegation whatsoever, in spite of the penalties that may be in store for us."

"Cuba will not sacrifice one bit of honor, nor any of its ideas, for Olympic gold medals," Castro wrote. ``The morale and patriotism of its athletes shall prevail above all else."

Boxing is the sport in which Cuba garners the most medals in major international events. At the 2004 Athens Games, Cuba had five boxing golds among its total of nine.

German boxing promoter Arena had announced it signed Lara and Rigondeaux to five-year contracts, but the fighters were arrested in the coastal resort city of Cabo Frio for overstaying their visas. The fighters told police they wanted to return to Cuba and hinted they were tricked into deserting, maybe even drugged by promoters.

Rigondeaux refused to elaborate on what happened in Brazil. "I don't want to remember those moments. Those are sad moments," he said.

Castro, who turns 81 on Monday, has not been seen in public since ceding power to his younger brother in July 2006. But he is now writing essays every few days, and previously blamed American money for Rigondeaux and Lara's disappearance, saying they were ``knocked down with a blow straight to the chin, paid up with U.S. bills."

He wrote Wednesday that Cuba's government "kept its word," treating the deported boxers humanely. He hinted that after the boxers conducted interviews with state media, officials were not convinced Rigondeaux and Lara sincerely wanted to return to Cuba before their arrests.

Castro blamed the disappearances on Lara, writing that ``who, as captain of the boxing team, broke the rules and played directly into the hands of the mercenaries."

He also cited news reports from Brazil in writing that, during their 12-day absence, the pair holed up in a resort hotel with German promoters and three prostitutes. "These are uncomfortable but essential details," he wrote. ``I imagine the boxers informed their closest, adult relatives about these facts."

Rigondeaux said he met with top Communist Party members since his return and was waiting for "reorientation," so he can do "what the superiors say." But he said he also hoped to fight again someday.

"I want to reclaim my titles," he said. ``Retake what I've lost."