

Castro death rumors crop up again

For the third week in a row, rumors of Fidel Castro's death spread across South Florida.

The Miami Herald
Aug. 25, 2007

The rumors heated up again Friday for the third week in a row: Fidel Castro's death would be announced, first at 2 p.m., then at 4, then at 5.

In the year since the Cuban government announced Castro had ceded power to brother Raúl following intestinal surgery, rumors he's on his deathbed keep boiling over and dying down, creating a roller coaster of emotion for exiles and islanders.

Tearful callers told Ninoska Pérez of Radio Mambí they were sure this was it, and Pérez, as usual, said, "The moment will come, but this is not the moment."

At Aaction Home Health in Hialeah, office workers were abuzz because one heard that people in Havana were taking to the streets in anticipation of the news. At the University of Miami, media relations officers worked the phones in search of confirmation. And celebrity blogger Perez Hilton posted an entry insisting Castro was dead.

FALSE ALARM

Friday's round of rumors, like those before them, didn't seem to be panning out.

Castro has written several recent newspaper columns, but he has not been seen in public in more than a year. For many, waiting for proof of his demise resembles the low-grade anxiety of bracing for a hurricane that may or may not hit. Even though it seems clear there won't be any real change on the island immediately after Castro's death, the exile community is preparing for something big nonetheless.

The rumors reached fever pitch last weekend. Calls flooded Miami Mayor Manny Diaz's office. UM's Cuba experts were on high alert. The community started rumbling anew, parents reaching out to children, friends calling friends.

"Last Friday, when the rumors started again, my phone rang off the hook," says Andy Gomez, senior fellow at UM's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. "It was everybody. Friends, family, the State Department. People went nuts."

Another false alarm. Which, in an ironic way, was a relief to many who yearn for the end of Castro but know they'll have to put their lives on hold to deal with it.

"Every time I buy a plane ticket to go somewhere with my family, I always say, 'If Fidel doesn't die,'" says Maria Elvira Salazar, host of WSBS-SBS 22's talk show *Polos Opuestos* (Opposite Poles).

“In a way, this is going to be like Hurricane Andrew times 10. We don't know what's going to happen, besides the idea that there will be a Pharaonic funeral. But we know when he dies, everything will revolve around his death. [Mega TV will] be on 24-7 for God knows how many days.”

Many South Florida Cubans jokingly say they hope Castro will make it through another weekend.

I did say last week, ‘If he's going to die, let him do it on a Monday,’ ” says Bárbara Gutiérrez, a media relations officer at the University of Miami and former editor at El Nuevo Herald.

“When the new rumors started, I felt like, ‘Oh no. Here we go.’ Because when this happens, it won't be just dealing with work. It'll be dealing with my mother, who will want to go out and celebrate.

“It will be dealing with my own feelings. It will be dealing with the fact that in my family there are a lot of older people who we will have to be careful with, because the emotion of it all could make them sick.”

For now, though, the older generation in particular is coping, says Radio Mambí's Armando Perez Roura, a longtime Cuban radio personality who has been poised to break the news of Castro's demise for decades.

“This is definitely the calm before the storm,” Perez Roura says.

After all, he says, it was a younger, more recently arrived Cuban crowd that jumped the gun and swarmed Calle Ocho to celebrate Castro's death when news of his ceding power broke at the end of July last year.

“The rest of us have spent a lot of years in this process,” Perez Roura says. “Waiting for something to happen, hearing rumors that never turn out to be true. We're not going to react until we know for sure.”

“Both in Cuba and in exile, you can breathe a very tense calm,” says Ramon Colas, who helped start *Bibliotecas Independientes* (Independent Libraries) in Cuba and left the island in 2001.

He now runs a Cuba race-relations project in Mississippi but still has regular exchanges with people on the island.

STAYING CALM

“Everybody is waiting to be able to say with certainty, ‘*El viejo se fue*’ [the old man is gone], but we know how much the Cuban government manipulates the truth. We know they can be the ones to launch rumors that he is dead in the first place, just to gauge our reaction. So we stay guarded.”

That emotional limbo can be damaging, says Dr. Julio Licinio, chairman of UM's psychiatry department.

“With Castro, there is nothing concrete. He keeps lingering. When something is unresolved, it makes you emotionally unsettled.”

Which is why Sonia del Corral was glad that her father, Victor del Corral, founder of the famed Victor's Café in New York, died when he did.

It might seem weird to say, but my father was fine when he heard that Fidel was sick and had ceded power to Raúl. The next day he had a heart attack and slipped into a coma. So he died thinking Cuba was about to be free. He didn't have to stick around for another year of the waiting game and then maybe not outlive Castro. I'm happy that he was able to say to me, *‘Ya, hija, ya.’* (It's over, daughter, it's over.)

Oscar Haza, host of WJAN-America TeVe Channel 41's popular *A Mano Limpia* (The Gloves Are Off) hears the anxiety in the voices of viewers who call in to check on the rumors.

Knowing how desperate the Cuban exile community is for confirmation of Castro's death, Haza has tried to find a way to calm people whenever new rumors get them riled.

I say, ‘Don't pay attention to all the rumors. When you tune in and you hear me say *‘Ya,’* you will know that means *‘Ya.’*”