

Castro signs essay amid health rumors

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HAVANA --

Fidel Castro signed a lengthy essay published Sunday saluting a Cuban political figure but giving no hint of how he is feeling, even amid rampant rumors of his death.

The 81-year-old Castro has not been seen in public in over a year and has not even appeared in official photographs or video footage since taping an interview with Cuban state television June 5.

The lack of images has fueled speculation among the Cuban exile community in Miami and elsewhere that Castro might have died. He announced on July 31, 2006 that he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery and was temporarily ceding power to his younger brother Raul.

Officials in Havana have refused to speak about Castro's condition, but foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told reporters in Brazil last week that "Fidel is doing very well and is disciplined in his recovery process." He insisted the gray-bearded leader maintains "permanent" contact with top government officials.

Castro's essay, the latest in dozens of "Reflections of the Commander in Chief" columns he has published several times a week since late March, was signed Saturday evening and appeared in the Communist Youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde on Sunday.

Verbose but clearly stated and easy to follow, Castro wrote of Eduardo Chibas, the president of Cuba's Orthodox Party, who was born 100 years ago this month. Chibas campaigned against corruption that plagued Cuba's government before Castro and his band of rebels toppled dictator Fulgencio Batista in January 1959.

Castro listed political events that linked his younger years with Chibas, who shot himself during a radio broadcast in 1951, a year before Batista seized power in a coup. At Chibas' funeral, a young Castro jumped atop the grave to denounce the government.

"With Chibas alive there would have been no way for (Batista) to carry out a coup," Castro wrote, "because the founder of the Cuban People (Orthodox) Party watched him closely and methodically put him up for public scrutiny."

There was no hint of trouble over the weekend in Havana, where the streets have been calm and Cuban flags remained at full-mast. Official media was dominated by stories of Cuban officials' preparation for the new school year and news from Venezuela and Iraq.

Rumors of Castro's death are a staple in Miami. But their frequency has intensified in recent days, after his 81st birthday came and went Aug. 13 with neither pictures, letters nor recordings from him released by the government.

Speculation went into overdrive Friday when Miami officials met to go over their plans for when Castro dies. Even celebrity blogger Perez Hilton, a Cuban-American who

normally deals with Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton, jumped into the fray, writing that sources were saying the Miami police were poised to announce Castro's death.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez addressed speculation about the health of his close friend and ally on Saturday, saying "I'm not going to be clearing up rumors and more rumors every day. Every little while they say Fidel died."