

Castro essay criticizes 2008 candidates

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HAVANA --

A new essay by ailing leader Fidel Castro accused U.S. presidential candidates of "submission" to his exiled foes in Florida and offered a favorable assessment of only one of the 10 presidents he has known: Jimmy Carter.

Candidates for the U.S. presidential election in 2008 "are totally absorbed by the Florida adventure," said the column published Tuesday by the Communist Party newspaper Granma and other official media.

It was signed by Castro, who has not been seen in videos since June 5.

Castro said that both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama "feel the sacred duty to demand 'a democratic government in Cuba'" - something Cuban officials insist already exists.

Obama last weekend called for loosening restrictions on how often Cuban-Americans can visit family on the island and how much money they can send them.

"It can help make their families less dependent on Fidel Castro. That's the way to bring about real change in Cuba," Obama told more than 1,000 people in Miami's Little Havana.

Clinton, a New York senator and the Democratic front-runner, last week reiterated her support for current U.S. policy: "Until it is clear what type of policies might come with a new (Cuban) government, we cannot talk about changes in the U.S. policies toward Cuba."

The column - the second published so far this week - made no reference to recent rumors that Castro had died or was dying. Nor did it reveal any information about his exact ailment or condition. Castro has not been seen in public in the 13 months since he announced he had undergone intestinal surgery and temporarily ceded power to his younger brother Raul.

Castro also described his relations with other U.S. presidents he had dealt with since 1959.

"I only knew one who for ethical-religious reasons was not complicit to the brutal terrorism against Cuba: James Carter," Tuesday's essay read - though it noted that a law banning U.S. attempts to assassinate foreign leaders such as Castro took effect during Gerald Ford's administration.

Castro noted that Carter opened the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and supported an agreement on maritime limits.

Despite his efforts, Castro said, "the circumstances of that time impeded him from going further."

Castro said Bill Clinton was "really friendly" during a brief encounter at a U.N. summit and said he was "intelligent in demanding that rule of law be followed" in the case of castaway boy Elian Gonzalez, who was returned from the U.S. to Cuba in 2000 after an international custody battle.

He also acknowledged that Clinton apparently tried to stop flights by exile pilots who had enraged the communist government by repeatedly scattering anti-communist literature over Havana.

But he criticized Clinton for backing legislation to tighten the U.S. trade embargo after Cuban jet fighters shot down the civilian planes off the island's coast during a repeat visit in February 1996.

"It was an electoral year, and he took advantage of that," Castro said, noting that Clinton invited exile leaders to witness his signing of "the criminal law."