

Castro looking alert in new video

The Miami Herald
Sep. 22, 2007

HAVANA --

Looking alert in his first video aired in three months, Cuban leader Fidel Castro responded to rumors of his death with a simple answer: "Well, here I am."

During an hour-long interview taped and aired on Cuban television Friday, the ailing 81-year-old revolutionary also said he thought the U.S. would go to war with Iran and he lamented the high costs of military operations in Iraq.

In the video, Castro appeared pale and stayed seated the entire time. He spoke slowly and softly and didn't always look the interviewer in the eye. But he appeared to be thinking clearly.

Mocking rumors of his death that have circulated in Miami and elsewhere in the U.S., he said "they say 'I was dying' and 'if I die' and 'I will die the day after tomorrow' or something."

"Nobody knows the day they are going to die," said Castro, who was forced to cede power to his younger brother Raul in July 2006 following emergency intestinal surgery. He has not appeared in public since.

Early in the interview, Castro often trailed off mid-sentence, and needed some prompting by the interviewer. He had bags under his eyes, sunken cheeks and his thin gray beard looked as wispy as ever. But he appeared to get stronger and more comfortable as time passed.

The video's release came as a surprise. Cuban officials broke into regularly scheduled programming only minutes before the video was broadcast to announce that a "conversation" with Castro would be shown. They said the interview was taped Friday.

Backing up the assertion, Castro mentioned recent prices of oil and the value of the euro against the dollar. He also discussed an essay he signed that was published in state media on Wednesday.

"Yesterday the euro was at US\$1.41. Oil I think about US\$84 a barrel," Castro said.

He also held up a copy of the new book by former U.S. Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, "The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World." At one point he quoted from it, reading excerpted passages in very large type instead of using the book itself.

The Cuban leader wore a red, blue and white jumpsuit with "F. Castro" in small block letters.

"They criticize me" for wearing the tracksuit, Castro joked. But he said he was "not looking for anything elegant."

Castro's condition and exact ailment are state secrets, though he wrote in one of his many essays that he had undergone multiple surgeries, at least one of which went poorly. He is recovering in an undisclosed location.

For months, official photographs and videos were released to show Castro's recovery, but no new images had surfaced since he appeared in an interview on Cuban television June 5.

Arnaldo Fuster, who watched the Castro interview with his wife and children in his old Havana home, said he thought the Cuban leader looked better in the latest video.

"He's whole. He's better, I think, than ever," Fuster said. "He's old, but he's whole. His memory is normal, he looks normal."

But in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood, people greeted the Castro video with a mixture of skepticism and disappointment. Some doubted the tape was made on Friday.

"Could be six months ago. Could be one year ago," said Cuban-born Victoria Martinez, 76, of Hollywood, Fla., who called the leader's talk "incoherent."

Although there are frequent rumors of Castro's demise, they had reached a fever pitch in Miami last month after the leader's 81st birthday came without any news.

Earlier Friday, Vice President Carlos Lage told reporters that the essays Castro has signed every few days since late March are evidence that his health is strong.

"Fidel continues to recuperate. It's a productive recuperation as we can see in the press," said Lage, apparently referring to the publication in state newspapers of Castro's "Reflections of the Commander in Chief."

In Venezuela, ally President Hugo Chavez started a speech with an announcement that Castro was speaking on Cuban state television. "A long life to Fidel and the Cuban revolution," he shouted.

Earlier while traveling in Brazil, Chavez said Castro was "close to death" but underwent several operations and has regained weight.

Castro had "three operations, and he's 81, imagine that. They changed almost all the blood with transfusions. Fidel is alive because he is Fidel," Chavez said.