

Castro, Chavez chat in live broadcast

The Miami Herald
Oct. 14, 2007

HAVANA --

Fidel Castro made his first live appearance on Cuban airwaves since falling ill 14 months ago, sounding lucid and in good humor as he exchanged praise and jokes Sunday with the Venezuelan president.

Castro's telephone call to a television and radio program came minutes after visiting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez aired a new videotape of their weekend meeting in which he sang revolutionary hymns to Castro and called him "father of all revolutionaries."

"I am very touched when you sing about Che," Castro told Chavez during his hour-long call to Chavez's "Alo, Presidente!" program - referring to revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara, to whom the program was dedicated.

"There is electricity in the air," Chavez said, obviously pleased with Castro's call.

Castro, who has not appeared in public since falling ill in July 2006, made his last live media appearance in February with a phone call to Chavez's radio program broadcast from Venezuela. But there was a half-hour delay before that program was broadcast in Cuba.

On the videotape, reportedly made during a meeting of more than four hours Saturday afternoon, Chavez also gave Castro a painting he said he made while imprisoned in the early 1990s after leading a failed coup.

The dark-colored painting showed the bars of his cell and a night scene beyond, with a full red moon and a guard tower in the distance.

Castro told him he needed to sign his work. "No one knows the merit that this has, that you did this!"

Cuban state television was broadcasting Chavez's program live from Santa Clara, where the communist government last week commemorated the 40th anniversary of Guevara's death.

Chavez toured the museum below the towering statue of Guevara, which also contains a mausoleum housing Guevara's remains.

Earlier Sunday, Cuban state media released two new official photos of the men together, but provided no details about the ailing Cuban leader's health.

In both the video and the photographs, Castro wore the red, white and blue track suit that has become his typical dress during his convalescence. Both men sat in bamboo chairs at an undisclosed location. Although Castro looks older and his gray beard has thinned

considerably, he appears lucid and animated as he thumbs through a copy of Guevara's "Bolivian Diary" and the pair discuss the revolutionary's life and legacy.

Both men seemed mindful that the leadership of Latin America's left is being passed from one generation to another, with Chavez calling Castro "the father of all revolutionaries in this America" in the video.

"Our father, who is in the water, earth and air," Chavez said in an almost religious tone that evoked the Lord's Prayer.

"You will never die," Chavez told Castro. "You remain forever on this continent and with these nations, and this revolution is more alive today than ever, and Fidel, you know it, we will take charge of continuing to fan the flame."

The last official image of Castro was a photograph released late last month, showing him looking more robust than in some past pictures as he stood and greeted Angolan President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos.

Chavez has visited the 81-year-old Castro several times since the Cuban leader underwent emergency intestinal surgery in late July 2006 and ceded authority to his younger brother Raul.