

### New Fidel Castro column quiets rumors

Fidel Castro broke his five-week silence Thursday January 22, publishing his first newspaper column since the start of widespread speculation that he was gravely ill.

The Cuban newspaper Granma published a 317-word column under Castro's signature about his 40-minute meeting with Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who surprised Cuba-watchers Wednesday with news of a last-minute meeting with the ailing former dictator.

On Thursday, she told reporters in Caracas that the 82-year-old greeted her "standing, like a gentleman."

Later in the day, an online column signed by Castro said he counts himself lucky to have been able to reflect on current events but doubts he'll be able to follow them four years from now.

"I expect I won't enjoy that privilege in four years, when Obama's first presidential term has ended," the column said, without elaborating.

Castro's earlier column described the meeting with Fernández as "intense" and "interesting," as he expected. "She is a person of profound convictions," he wrote. "There were no debates."

The article, coming on the heels of the surprise diplomatic visit, helped further debunk speculation that Castro had fallen seriously ill.

Before Thursday, Castro's column was last published Dec. 15.

On the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution on New Year's Day, his message to the Cuban people was one sentence long.

The presidents of Panama and Ecuador visited Cuba recently and did not meet with Castro, leading to speculation and unconfirmed reports that he was on his deathbed.

Experts wondered whether Castro - who has been sick for 2 ½ years - had died, and his brother Raúl Castro was waiting until after Obama's inauguration to announce it.

Andy Gomez, a senior fellow at the UM institute, said Castro may be alive, but in such poor physical state that the government chose not to release photographs or videos of his encounter with Fernández.

"I have no reason to doubt Cristina Fernández, but I do not believe she met with him for 40 minutes, and today's column was clearly not written by him," he said.

"We analyzed it at great depth, and the language and words used are not his. It is suspect to me."

The column says Castro respects the Argentine leader because among other things, during her trips abroad she sets aside time to exercise.

"When we spoke about the United States, I indicated the historic importance for Cuba that yesterday at noon, 10 presidents had passed over a period of 50 years, despite the immense power of that nation, they could not destroy the Cuban revolution," he wrote.

*Source: Miami Herald*

### Cuba's Raul Castro on Russia visit

Cuban President Raul Castro on Wednesday January 28 arrived in Russia on the first visit by a Cuban leader since the Cold War aiming to revive Soviet-era ties.

The visit comes as both countries watch for change in the foreign policy of the United States, which came under heavy Russian criticism in the era of George W. Bush and which maintains a blockade on the Communist island.

Castro said before the visit he wanted to expand relations with Russia -- healing a rift that appeared with the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of Soviet subsidies.

"We know what happens on the planet when equality is destroyed, when they start wars, attacks and are unjust in their relations," he said in a clear reference to the United States, quoted by ITAR-TASS.

"We, like many others, see Russia's rebirth as a positive factor," Castro told the Russian news agency. "Relations between Russia and Cuba are excellent and this visit to Moscow will serve to strengthen ties between our countries."

Relations already took a turn for the better last November when Medvedev visited Havana on a Latin American tour aimed at restoring what he called "privileged" Soviet-era relations with the region.

In December a group of Russian warships visited Havana on a tour seen as a deliberate attempt to challenge US dominance in Latin America, although US officials have remained sanguine about such Russian manoeuvres.

On the current visit the focus will be on tying up a raft of business deals that include plans for a Russian consortium to explore oil fields off Cuba's coast in the Gulf of Mexico and plans for cooperation in nickel production on the island, officials have said.

Russia also may well reaffirm its support for the lifting of the US economic blockade of Cuba.

"Our country has consistently stood for normalizing the situation around Cuba, for its fully fledged reintegration into regional and world processes," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in comments released Wednesday.

"What is important is that Latin American countries are united in their efforts to overcome Havana's isolation," Lavrov said.

The two countries have in the last couple of years emphasized their wish to revive a relationship that flourished in the Soviet era when Moscow was the island's main sponsor and that came to a sudden halt with the Soviet collapse.

A 2001 decision by president Vladimir Putin to shut down a Russian military base and radar station on the island only worsened a by then frosty relationship.

Russia's president hosted Cuban leader Raul Castro at the Kremlin for talks Friday January 30, promising to intensify ties with Moscow's Cold War ally.

Bilateral trade last year was only \$239 million - a figure Medvedev said the two nations can quickly boost.

"I am convinced that we have very good conditions to bring our relations to a strategic level. We have very good potential for development," Medvedev told Castro at the beginning of their talks.

"Undoubtedly this is a very important moment, a key landmark in relations between Russia and Cuba."

Fidel Castro last arrived on an official visit to Russia in 1977, according to a Kremlin official. He also visited the country in 1987 for celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution, according to the Latin America Institute in Moscow.

*Sources: AFP, BBC, AP, Miami Herald*

### **Cuba renews demands that the U.S. hand over Guantanamo**

For more than a century, the United States has controlled the Guantanamo naval base in eastern Cuba for a measly \$4,085 in lease fees per year. Cuba has long refused to cash the checks.

Now, with President Barack Obama ordering the prison for terrorism suspects at the base closed within a year, Cuba is renewing demands that the U.S. hand over the entire base.

"We have always said that Cuba expects to recover this territory," Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said Wednesday, after announcing that Cuba was inviting the U.N. special investigator on torture to visit the island this year.

The U.S. military base was built on land permanently leased from Cuba under terms dating back to 1903. For the Bush administration, a foreign naval base under full American control was the perfect place for holding and interrogating suspected terrorists. Many Guantanamo prisoners said they were beaten and tortured at the hands of the United States.

"Cuba is a country where in the last 50 years there has not been a single person 'disappeared,' case of torture nor extrajudicial execution," Perez Roque said.

Cuba holds more than 200 political prisoners and fails to respect basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly, according to rights monitors. The state considers the prisoners mercenaries working for the United States to undermine the communist system.

On Wednesday January 28, Perez Roque said Obama's presidential order to close the controversial detention center was "positive" but "insufficient."

Still, not all Cubans should be happy to see the Americans leave. Last fall, only three of the hundreds of Cubans who once worked at the naval base continued to hold jobs there, according to "The Cuba Wars" by Daniel Erikson, a Cuba expert at the Washington D.C.-based Inter-American Dialogue think tank. The men were 75, 78 and 83 years old.

"Perhaps their most important function was to carry pensions into Cuba for three hundred retired Cubans," Erikson wrote. "Once a month, the U.S. military sent its three elderly workers across the fence line carrying close to \$60,000 in cash for its former employees."

*Source: Sun Sentinel*