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## In Little Havana, joy & suspicion are order of day

BY DAVID APPELL  
DAILY NEWS WRITER

MIAMI - Florida's Cuban community was awash in joy and conspiracy theories yesterday, with most everyone convinced that Fidel Castro wasn't just sick but had already kicked the bucket.

"We're positive Fidel is dead - this announcement is typical of the secretive ways Communist regimes operate," said Santiago Portal, 59.

A hydraulic engineer who came to America in 1970, Portal was wearing a white suit with a red carnation and flashing a victory sign at the parade of honking cars on Calle Ocho, the heart of Miami's Little Havana.

Vendors sold Cuban flags to passing motorists for \$7. A boom box blared the Cuban national anthem. A man stuck his head out of a gray Jeep Laredo and shouted, "Viva Cuba libre!"

Ismael Balido, 75, a retired salesman nursing a cup of café Cubano, was among those sure Castro was already dead. "Why would he cede power to his brother? That man would rule Cuba with his last dying breath," he said.

"They can't just come out and say Fidel's dead, and risk all hell breaking loose. The regime's preparing the population with a carefully planned transition."

When news broke Monday that Castro was out of power - news that some of Miami's 800,000 Cuban-Americans have waited nearly 50 years to hear - thousands flooded the streets, yelling, honking horns, banging pots and waving flags. It didn't matter that the situation could be temporary.

Miami's Telemundo and Univision affiliates - along with the city's 15 Spanish-language radio stations - preempted regular programming to stay with the story all day.


Miami-Dade County activated a rumor control hotline to field reports that Cuban armed forces were mobilizing and the country's airports were shut. Even President Bush's visit to Florida on Monday was considered a sign of big doings behind the scenes.


"That's one reason Bush was down here - they knew something was up, and were getting their plans squared away," said electrician Enrique Alvarez, 61, who was in the Cuban special services in the 1980s.

"I feel strongly that the end's rapidly approaching, and this brings great joy to me."


Amado Herrera, 60, a retired flight attendant, cautioned against jumping to conclusions. "We've gotten our hopes up so many times and then Castro turns up again," Herrera said. "But it sure does look like something's happened."

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