

Communist Cuba celebrates 50 years of revolution

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Cuban rebel leader Fidel Castro, right, with and revolutionary leader Camilo Cienfuegos, enters Havana on January 8, 1959 after their victory over the forces of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

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Communist Cuba marked a major political milestone on Thursday: the 50th anniversary of its revolution, its iconic leader Fidel Castro withdrawn from power, the economy in dire straits and President Raul Castro insisting the revolution has not failed.

"The feeling of joy is immense. Yet we still have a lot left to do," the president said on state television late on Wednesday.

"Let's not kid ourselves believing that from here on, it's all going to be easy. Maybe from here on, it's going to be more difficult," he cautioned.

Despite hardships he blamed on US sanctions, President Castro stressed: "This hasn't been a failure, not even under these conditions. It has been a constant fight."

Official festivities, led by President Raul Castro, 77 - who officially took over from his ailing 82-year-old brother Fidel Castro last February - were due to centre on Santiago de Cuba, the south-eastern city in the shadow of the Sierra Maestra range from which the revolution began.

The president was scheduled to give a televised anniversary address in Santiago de Cuba at 2300 GMT.

Fidel Castro, who has not appeared in public since undergoing major surgery almost two and a half years ago, was not expected to participate. He sent a brief signed anniversary greeting to the Cuban people, however, in the morning edition of Granma, the Communist Party newspaper.

After years of economic embargo and hardline US efforts to isolate the island, Havana now faces rare potential for change in the form of US president-elect Barack Obama. He has voiced willingness to communicate unconditionally with world leaders including Cuba's.

Raul Castro said the Cuban people should feel proud of having endured US sanctions.

"We've had no peace, we've had no calm," Raul Castro added. "The enemy says socialism has failed; why don't they leave us alone so we can fight on equal terms?"

Five decades ago a 32-year-old Fidel Castro announced the start of the revolution in the island's second city after the victory of a 25-month guerilla war over US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista.

The revolution - also led by legendary Argentine guerilla Ernesto "Che" Guevara - took on Marxist overtones in May 1961, one month after the attempted invasion of the Bay of Pigs by CIA-backed Cuban exiles.

Former US president John F Kennedy declared an embargo in February 1962, before the Soviet missile crisis, which took the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The two nations separated by just 145km of water have remained bitter political foes.

A White House spokesman in Texas on Wednesday said Washington "will continue to seek freedom" for the people of Cuba. He named no new steps or initiatives.

But Obama, who takes power on January 20, has promised to ease some rules limiting travel by and remittances from Cuban-Americans; Raul Castro repeatedly has said he is ready for talks without "carrot or stick" with Obama.

The Cuban president has also promised "structural reforms" - a departure from his older brother and leading members of the communist old guard. That fuelled Cubans' high expectations for change that can improve their living standards, but they have not seen it yet.

The Cuban Communist Party has many backers of the status quo who, like Fidel Castro, are loath to loosen the regime's tight controls, as well as pragmatists pushing for a controlled opening up of the economy.

But Raul Castro's promised changes may be in limbo thanks to the global economic crisis as the president signalled in July, when he announced greater government control of revenues and tighter management of agriculture.

"It's my duty to speak frankly, because it would be unethical to create false expectations," he said after telling Cubans to expect tough economic times from spiralling international fuel and food prices.

The Caribbean island also was brutally battered by three hurricanes in 2008 that caused \$10 billion (\$14.5 billion) in damage - equivalent to 20 per cent of Cuba's gross national product - no longer manages to meet its debt repayments.

It is still officially in the Special Period in Peacetime, an extended period of economic crisis that began in 1991 after the collapse of its main benefactor, the Soviet Union.

Although the nation of 11.2 million people has since found new partners, particularly oil-rich Venezuela, life remains difficult for most Cubans, who earn an average of \$20 per month and survive due to a parallel economy.

Branded US puppets by Havana, Cuban dissidents say there are 219 "political prisoners" on the island.

During his decades in power, Fidel Castro expropriated foreign companies, jailed political enemies and drove well over a million Cubans into exile.

But he also introduced historic reforms, including major education and healthcare advances.