

Castro warns Cubans of impending economic crisis, slams Trump for meddling in Venezuela

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Miami Herald. April 10, 2019 02:56 PM, Updated April 10, 2019 05:06 PM

Cuban leader Raúl Castro, head of the Communist Party, warned Cubans to brace for an economic crisis during a speech on April 10, 2019. By

Cuban leader Raúl Castro, former president and current head of the ruling Communist Party, reiterated his support for Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and urged Cubans to be prepared for a further deterioration of the island's economy during a speech Wednesday to formally recognize the new Constitution approved in a referendum in February.

Castro, who stepped down as president last April and handed the seat to Miguel Díaz-Canel but remains in command of the country as first secretary of the Communist Party, also used the podium to send a message to the Donald Trump administration.

"The tone of the United States government against Cuba is increasingly threatening. Cuba is blamed for all evils, using lies in the worst style of Hitler propaganda. We will never abandon the duty to act in solidarity with Venezuela," Castro said. "We have told the North American administration with the greatest clarity, firmness and serenity, through direct diplomatic channels and publicly, that Cuba does not fear the threats."

Castro said that the government was already taking measures to strengthen the defensive capabilities of its armed forces. In recent weeks, Cuban television has been showing images of military exercises. At the same time, he warned the Cuban populace to brace for further deterioration of the economy.

"It is not a question of returning to the acute phase of the Special Period of the '90s of the last century," he said, referring to the island's economic collapse following the end of subsidies with the fall of the former Soviet Union. "Today, there is another scenario in terms of the diversification of the economy, but we have to be prepared for the worst variant. ... We need to be alert and aware that we face additional problems and that the situation could get worse in a few months."

Castro's morning speech was not televised live but was broadcast later. He also announced that the country will have a new government in the coming months.

Without releasing more details on how it was drafted, Castro said that the approval of a proposed new electoral law will be discussed at the next National Assembly session, which has not yet been scheduled. According to the new Constitution, he added, a new Electoral Council will also be created, and within three months, the National Assembly will have to elect a new president of the country and a new

Council of State. The new president must appoint a prime minister, a new position created in the new Constitution.

Castro added that all the changes in government should take place this year.

The possible changes in the country's leadership come at a time of great political and economic tension on the island. The Trump administration has increased pressure against the Cuban government, which it has accused of supporting the Maduro regime in Venezuela. Unlike previous administrations, Trump did away with the automatic six-month suspension of Title III of the Helms-Burton Act, which opens the door to potential lawsuits by Americans against companies "trafficking" in property seized by the Cuban government. He recently allowed partial implementation of Title III and is expected to decide on whether to allow its full implementation in coming days.

Additional sanctions against the Cuban government also could be announced as soon as next week, said a source familiar with the discussions.

During the past few months, the ongoing crisis in Venezuela has raised fear of an impending economic crisis on the island. Venezuela is Cuba's main political and commercial ally. The governments of the late Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have sent oil to the island at subsidized prices. But decreased oil production under Maduro has caused a drop in shipments to around 40,000 barrels per day, which could be further reduced due to recent [U.S. sanctions on ships and companies that transport oil from Venezuela to the island](#).

According to some estimates, the Cuban government would have to spend close to \$2 billion to cover current domestic fuel consumption if shipments of Venezuelan oil stop. At the height of the barter agreement under Chávez — exchanging oil for medical services — Cuba received 100,000 barrels per day and re-exported derivatives to obtain extra income.

The Cuban government also suffered a severe economic blow with the cancellation of the Mais Medicos program in Brazil, through which it exported the services of Cuban doctors to that country and obtained millions in government coffers.

Castro closed his speech Wednesday with an old slogan from his brother, the late Fidel Castro: "Cuba has already demonstrated that it was possible, that it is possible and that we will always be able to resist. To fight and to achieve victory, there is no other alternative. "

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