

Florida braces for a free Cuba; Immigrants in Miami await fall of Castro

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Byline: By Mike Williams Staff writer cuba; soviet/union; government; reform; immigration; united/states; policy

Body

MIAMI - If Russian communism is dead, **MIAMI**'s Cubans are fervently hoping the virus that killed it is catching.

The post-coup tumult in the Soviet Union has left this Latin- flavored city - already the de facto capital of the **free** and democratic **Cuba** that everyone here wants to see - buzzing with anticipation that the 32-year-old rule of Fidel **Castro** may be heaving its last gasps.

"It's a whole new situation," said Juan Hernandez, 41, a Little Havana grocer who came to **MIAMI** from **Cuba** in 1980. "Anything could happen. All the people are thinking that what happened in the Soviet Union could happen in **Cuba**."

MIAMI city officials are **bracing** for a riotous victory celebration if Mr. **Castro falls**.

In addition, Coast Guard and immigration officials are reviewing plans for closing sea ports and patrolling airports to deal with a possible flood of Cuban **immigrants**.

Planners have already staked out positions for a small army of police, who will move the hordes into the Orange Bowl and churches, where special masses will be held in an effort to keep things from getting out of hand.

But the bigger worry facing city officials is what happens on the morning after. They fear a repeat of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, when 125,000 Cubans flooded South **Florida**'s shores in five weeks, triggering a massive crisis among law enforcement, immigration and social service agencies.

"Already the shelves there are empty," said Manolo Reyes, a Cuban- American hospital administrator who heads a Dade County task force preparing for the potential crisis. "Once **Castro** is overthrown, it will be tremendously bad there. We don't know how many will come, but once he's gone, the people will say, I'm **free**, I can go.' They'll take whatever floats."

A year ago, Coast Guard and immigration officials prepared plans for shutting down ports from Fort Lauderdale to Key West to boats either going to or from **Cuba** with **immigrants**. They will also beef up airport patrols for the same reasons.

Meanwhile, Gov. Lawton Chiles has revived a statewide Commission on a **Free Cuba**, first appointed in 1990 by his predecessor. The panel will meet later this month to update plans and study the evolving situation in **Cuba**.

But nobody knows when or how Mr. **Castro** will go, and many fear the end could be bloody and protracted. There was widespread speculation that the cigar-chomping dictator's days were numbered when the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe disintegrated almost two years ago, but he has held on, growing more belligerent as the Communist world continues to crumble around him.

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Whatever the means of Mr. Castro's departure, neither Cuba nor Miami will ever be the same. Thousands of exiles who have dreamed for years of returning home will suddenly be faced with a sobering choice between the new lives they've built or the old ones they left behind - if the pieces of their old lives can indeed be found.

"The older Cubans are really excited," said J.C. Rivero, 35, who came to Miami from Cuba when he was 5 and now owns a Little Havana jewelry and pawn shop. "But I'm settled. I've got a home and a business, a wife and kids. I'd go for a visit, but we consider ourselves American now."

Graphic

Photo: Parts of Miami have taken on the look of Cuba as thousands of refugees from the Caribbean island await their chance to go back home./ File

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