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Fidel Castro

Cubans say goodbye to Fidel Castro's ashes in four-day funeral procession

Caravan carrying leader's remains will retrace his victory tour after Cuban Revolution in reverse, from Havana to Santiago, in final leg of mourning period

A military vehicle transports the ashes of Cuba's late president Fidel Castro, starting in Havana and ending in Santiago. Photograph: Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

Associated Press in Havana

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Fidel Castro's ashes have begun a four-day journey across [Cuba](#) from Havana to their final resting place in the eastern city of Santiago.

A small, Cuban-flag-covered cedar coffin containing the remains of the 90-year-old leader was taken out of Cuba's defense ministry just after 7am and placed into a flower-bedecked trailer pulled by a green military jeep for the more than 500-mile (800km) procession. The ashes will be interred on Sunday, ending the nine-day mourning period for the man who ruled the country for nearly 50 years.

The route traces in reverse the victory tour Castro and his bearded rebels took after overthrowing the forces of strongman Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Carpenter René Mena, 58, said his mother had taken him out of their home along Havana's seafront Malecón boulevard as a baby to see Castro arrive in Havana that year. On Wednesday he donned a Cuban flag and a military cap outside the same house where he still lives, and saluted Castro's caravan.

"I saw him when he came and now I've seen him when he left. Goodbyes are moving, difficult," Mena said.

Outside Havana, the caravan will pass through rural communities significantly changed by social and economic reforms he adopted. Many residents now have access to healthcare and education. But many of those towns are also in a prolonged economic collapse, the country's once-dominant sugar industry decimated, the sugar mills and plantations gone.

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Thousands of Cubans lined the streets of Havana, some sleeping on sidewalks overnight, to bid goodbye to Castro. Many had attended a massive rally on Tuesday night at Havana's Revolution Plaza, where the presidents of Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and South Africa, along with leaders of a host of smaller countries, offered speeches paying tribute to Castro, who died on Friday night.

[‘He led a humble life’: Fidel Castro’s biographer on the legacy of a revolutionary](#)

The crowds at the rally and along Wednesday’s procession route were a mix of people attending on their own and groups of Cubans organized by government workplaces, where attendance was not strictly obligatory but with strong pressure to attend. Some groups of government workers slept on the streets because all public transport had been commandeered to move people to Castro-related activities.

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People wave Cuban flags and take photos as they watch the motorcade transporting Fidel Castro’s remains drive past in Havana. Photograph: Dario Lopez-Mills/AP

Along the city’s historic Malecón, the funeral procession passed to near-total silence among the crowd. People waved flags and took cellphone video and photos as keepsakes.

“We love the comandante and I think it’s our obligation to be here and see him out,” said Mercedes Antúnez, 59, who was bussed in by the state athletics organization from her home in east Havana along with fellow employees.

Tuesday’s rally began with black-and-white revolution-era footage of Castro and other guerrillas on a big screen and the playing of the Cuban national anthem. Castro’s younger brother and successor, Raúl, closed the rally with a speech thanking world leaders for their words of praise for his brother, whom he called the leader of a revolution “for the humble, and by the humble”.

The South African president, Jacob Zuma, praised Cuba under Castro for its record on education and healthcare and its support for African independence struggles.

To so many Africans, Fidel Castro is a hero. Here’s why

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Castro will be remembered as “a great fighter for the idea that the poor have a right to live with dignity”, Zuma told the crowd.

For two days, lines stretched for hours outside the Plaza de la Revolución, the heart of government power. In Havana and across the island, people signed condolence books and an oath of loyalty to Castro’s sweeping May 2000 proclamation of the Cuban revolution as an unending battle for socialism, nationalism and an outsize role for the island on the world stage.

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People participate in a massive rally on Revolution Square for Fidel Castro on 29 November. Photograph: Pedro Pardo/AFP/Getty Images

Inside the memorial, thousands walked through three rooms with near-identical displays featuring the 1962 Alberto Korda photograph of the young Castro in the Sierra Maestra mountains, bouquets of white flowers and an array of Castro’s medals against a black backdrop, framed by honor guards of soldiers and children in school uniforms. The ashes did not appear to be on display.

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Signs read: “The Cuban Communist party is the only legitimate heir of the legacy and authority of the commander in chief of the Cuban Revolution, comrade [Fidel Castro](#).”

The scene was played out on a smaller scale at countless places across the country as the government urged Cubans to reaffirm their belief in a socialist, single-party system that in recent years has struggled to maintain the fervor that was widespread at the triumph of the 1959 revolution.

After 10 years of leadership by Raúl Castro, a relatively camera-shy and low-key president, Cuba has found itself flooded once again by the words and images of the man who dominated the lives of generations. Since his death on Friday night, state-run newspapers, television and radio have run wall-to-wall tributes to Fidel Castro, broadcasting nonstop footage of his

speeches, interviews and foreign trips, interspersed with adulatory remembrances by prominent Cubans.