

CUBA - Top Cuban Official Ricardo Alarcón on Castro's Condition and Cuba's Future

Ricardo Alarcón, Amy Goodman & Jon Alpert, Democracy Now!

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Tuesday, December 5th, 2006 - [Democracy Now! News Program](#) - Cuba is coming off the week-long celebration of the eightieth birthday of President Fidel Castro. Castro's birthday was in August but celebrations were delayed after Castro fell ill with an unspecified intestinal condition. He has not appeared in public and not did attend any of last week's events. The Cuban government insists Castro is improving but there is speculation his condition is worse than has been publicly disclosed.

During his absence, Castro has ceded power to his brother, Raul. On Friday, Raul Castro attended a celebration at Havana's Karl Marx Theatre attended by thousands of people. The crowd heard from several foreign guests including Bolivian President Evo Morales and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

The week's events were capped with a military parade through Havana on Saturday. In a rare speech, acting Cuban president Raul Castro called for negotiations with the United States to resolve its long-standing isolation of the Cuban government. The Bush administration rejected the overture, calling Raul Castro "a dictator-in-waiting."

Our colleague Jon Alpert was in Cuba last week. It was his latest trip to a country he's visited regularly for more than 34 years. Jon is an Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker and the co-founder of Downtown Community Television. He joins me here in the firehouse studio. Jon's daughter, Tami Alpert, also just returned from Cuba with her father. She first visited Cuba when she was one and a half years old.

Jon Alpert sat down with Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón last week. In this broadcast exclusive, Alarcon talks about Castro's condition and Cuba's future.

AMY GOODMAN: The crowd heard from a number of foreign guests, including Bolivian President Evo Morales.

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] A sage man, an untiring comrade in the anti-imperialist struggle. To the new generation, he is a teacher, a friend, an older brother, unforgettable. To talk with Fidel is a great lesson, especially for me. I come here to express my respect, my admiration to the comandante, to his people, because to talk at this junction of Castro and of Fidel is to talk about solidarity, of equality, of the anti-imperialist struggle.

AMY GOODMAN: Evo Morales, the Bolivian president. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega also spoke.

PRESIDENT DANIEL ORTEGA: [translated] He is an inspiration. Like Jose Marti, he is a teacher, the teacher of a generation that was born, fights and will continue to fight for the example and the ideals of Fidel.

AMY GOODMAN: The week's events were capped with a military parade through Havana Saturday. In a rare speech, acting Cuban leader, Raul Castro, called for negotiations with the United States to resolve its

longstanding isolation of the Cuban government. The Bush administration rejected the overture, calling Raul Castro a, quote, “dictator-in-waiting.”

AMY GOODMAN: Today, we’re joined by longtime colleague, Jon Alpert. In Cuba this past week, his latest trip to the country, he has visited regularly for more than 34 years. Jon is an Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker and the co-founder of Downtown Community Television, which is where we broadcast from, as well, joining us in our firehouse studio. Jon’s daughter Tami Alpert also just returned from Cuba with her father. She first visited Cuba when she was, well, a year and a half. And we welcome you, as well, Tami and Jon.

So, you’ve just come back. What was this weekend like, the 80th birthday celebration without the birthday boy, Fidel Castro?

JON ALPERT: I think it was sort of bittersweet. I think that people came from all over the world, and Cubans paid tribute to him, but I think he would have liked to have attended his own party, and everybody would have liked to have seen him. And his absence was really missed.

AMY GOODMAN: You talked to the president of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon.

JON ALPERT: Yeah, we were able to, I think, to have the only interview with any top Cuban official during this week. The Cubans basically let the events speak for themselves and let Fidel’s absence speak for itself. And we had a very interesting discussion with President Alarcon, in which he talked personally about his own feelings, how we discovered that Fidel was ill, and what it means to the country.

AMY GOODMAN: Let’s play a clip of that interview.

JON ALPERT: If you could talk a little bit personally, when Fidel became sick, what were your first thoughts? How did you react to that? And how do you react to almost sort of the bittersweet? You know, people are paying tribute to Fidel, but we also realize that he’s human and that the clock ticks for everybody.

RICARDO ALARCON: Well, let me tell you this. I learned that directly from him. I didn’t hear anything before.

JON ALPERT: What did he tell you?

RICARDO ALARCON: I got a phone call by him. And it was a very short conversation by phone. He asked me, “Can you come here? How long will it take for you to come here?” I calculated, it was five, ten minutes. “Okay, I’ll see you.” That was by phone. When I arrived, I saw him laying on a bed with some —

JON ALPERT: Medical things attached to him?

RICARDO ALARCON: Yeah, these sort of things that the hospitals use. And then he explained to me what happened. That was after — that was how I learned that he had gone through surgery the day before.

JON ALPERT: So he called you after the operation?

RICARDO ALARCON: Yeah, of course. He described how was he. He knew everything, and he gave some details about what happened. In a way, of course, that raised a concern, because you [inaudible] and some sad feelings, because you see a friend suffering or having gone through a very risky situation. But on the other hand, was he himself, personally, live, direct, explaining to me what happened. And obviously, he was very alert, very alive. And we even made jokes.

JON ALPERT: Like what?

RICARDO ALARCON: For example, I told him, “Do you imagine what will happen in the world tomorrow?” because we talked about the announcement he was going to make that night.

JON ALPERT: Right.

RICARDO ALARCON: And I was right. From that moment, all the media around the world turned to that story: Fidel's operation, and so on and so forth. And we laughed, both, trying to figure out what was going to be the impact of this news. And we were right.

AMY GOODMAN: Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, speaking to documentary filmmaker Jon Alpert. In this next clip, Jon asked Alarcon to talk about Castro and the Cuban government, how it's adapted to Castro's illness.

RICARDO ALARCON: One clear modification is that he continues being the leader of the revolution, but not assuming or performing that leadership in the manner you were accustomed to, to see him doing things, moving around, and so on. Now, he is following things, giving directive, giving his views, his opinion, taking decisions, but not by performing, him personally, the most apparent role and not — being in a more discreet fashion, you don't see him, but he is very much involved in things that are going on. And other comrades are the ones that are moving around, spending hours handling the issues and reporting to him. He will give his — in other words, what Fidel is doing now is more akin to the style that most leaders use. Most leaders, for their entire tenure of office, have been working that way, and not Fidel's way. Fidel has to adjust to that.

JON ALPERT: So he has to delegate a little bit more than he did before. Is he a little bit bittersweet? Is he sorry that he can't celebrate this birthday in the way that I'm sure he would have liked to have celebrated it? Has he told you he's frustrated about that?

RICARDO ALARCON: I'm sure that he is. He even said in the message he sent to the participants in the celebration that he's sad he couldn't be there and salute them personally, and so on. It's different to imagine Fidel being forced to do that, and I am sure that it's especially sad for him.

JON ALPERT: Does he listen to his doctors? Does he mind them, or does he have his own ideas?

RICARDO ALARCON: Fidel has his own ideas, but he has to obey the doctors.

AMY GOODMAN: Cuban National Assembly President Alarcon, speaking in Havana this weekend with documentary filmmaker Jon Alpert, in our studio.

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