

Castro, the unknown element of the Seattle meeting

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Fidel Castro continues to be the main question mark on the eve of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial III Summit, which opens in this city on Tuesday.

Are you coming or not coming? That is the question that supporters and detractors of the Cuban ruler are asking themselves, in finalizing their preparatory process to honorably receive, or protest his presence in this beautiful and cold city of the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

In such preparation are the police force and Secret Service, who so far have not released details of President Bill Clinton's arrival to Seattle for the conference opening ceremony.

At least 50 Cubans, living in Seattle and in neighboring cities, are ready to express their discontent of Castro's presence in this region.

"If Castro comes I will be at the University to protest and to explain the truth of the Cuban situation" said Luis Cadaiga, a Cuban exile who has been living in this city for three decades.

For his part the vice-president of the state legislature, Clyde Ballard, a Republican for East Wenatchee, directed a heated letter of protest to the University of Washington for the invitation extended to Castro for him to speak on Thursday.

"I want to apologize to the citizens of Washington State because one of our major institutions of higher learning is welcoming a fascist dictator to our state with open arms," Ballard said.

The journalistic interest in Castro's visit, the fourth made to the United States since he assumed power in Cuba almost 41 years ago, notably increased following the request of congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Republican of Florida, to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and State Attorney General Christine Gregoire that Castro be indicted for murder.

Diaz-Balart wants Castro to be indicted for the deaths of four pilots from Brothers to the Rescue who were shot down over international waters by Cuban MiG fighters on February 24, 1996, while they were conducting a routine flight in search of rafters over the Straits of Florida.

The spokesperson for Gregoire, Liz Mendizabal, on Friday said that this was an issue for the Federal authorities rather than the state.

The Democrat representative for New Jersey, Bob Menéndez, and the Republican for Florida, Bill McCollum, sent similar letters to Reno urging Castro be indicted, while the Republican congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen called on the White House to deny Castro a visa.

For its part, the Seattle-Cuba Friendship Committee has been very active in recent weeks distributing propaganda in support of lifting the US economic embargo on Cuba, and planning several events to honor Cuba's delegation to the WTO reunion.

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