

Castro refuses to come to U.S. for fear of being arrested

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The Cuban ruler Fidel Castro ended up canceling his trip to Seattle to attend the Third Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) as he faces the possibility of being indicted on murder charges by federal U.S. authorities.

"I will leave aside the hysteria and threats of the noisy terrorist mob in Miami, who are always eager to provoke a bloody armed conflict between Cuba and the United States, which in this case would be an inevitable consequence of any attempt to forcibly hold me in Seattle," said Castro in a letter directed at Representative Jim McDermott, the Seattle Democrat who was preparing a warm welcome in this city.

In the letter distributed to the press in Havana yesterday, Castro said that official spokesmen for the U.S. government warned the director of the North American department [at the Cuban Foreign Ministry], Dagoberto Rodríguez, "of the possible consequences of the trip, using the same arguments as the Cuban-American extremist mob."

"What was most important to me was the United States' position with regard to my right to participate in an international meeting of the World Trade Organization, of which Cuba is a founding member," said Castro. "It would soon be evident that the U.S. government was opposed to my presence at the meeting in Seattle. I was certain that the State Department would not grant me a visa. Therefore, I did not even bother to apply. I did not wish to be subjected to this humiliation."

Employees at the State Department declined yesterday to comment on Castro's statements accusing the administration of being "consciously involved in a major provocation in Seattle."

David Shaffer, head of McDermott's press office in Seattle said that "the Congressman was very disappointed by the cancellation of the trip although he respects the reasons explained by Castro."

"In any case, McDermott will meet with the Cuban delegates to the WTO, considering that it is a very high level delegation," emphasized Shaffer. "This Monday evening, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque will arrive and the date and place of that meeting will be coordinated with him."

For his part, the Republican congressman from Florida, Lincoln Díaz-Balart said that Castro's allegations were a smokescreen to hide the real reasons that provoked the cancellation of his trip.

"Castro's withdrawal is a victory for the rule of law in the United States, aside from the guarantees and invitations of this Administration," said Díaz-Balart. "Castro didn't want to risk that one of the 3,000 prosecutors in this country might give the order to arrest him."

Last week, Díaz-Balart directed a letter to the nation's state and federal prosecutors urging them to indict Castro for the murder of four pilots from Brothers to the Rescue who died when MiG fighter jets from Cuba's Air Force downed two airplanes from that organization in international waters on February 24, 1996.

"I've already received responses from various state prosecutors asking why the federal prosecutors have not done anything yet and [indicating] that they are willing to indict Castro," emphasized Díaz-Balart. "This is not going to stop here."

Caricature of Fidel Castro

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