

Castro ridicules gaffe-prone Bush

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By Anthony Boadle

HAVANA (Reuters) - Cuban leader Fidel Castro is using humour to defend himself from U.S. hostility, ridiculing President George W. Bush for his gaffes.

"Bush could not debate a Cuban ninth grader, who knows more than he does," Castro said in a speech closing an international conference of economists hosted by his communist government.

Castro had his audience of 1,400 economists in stitches when he read out some of Bush's more unfortunate statements.

Among other gaffes, Castro quoted Bush as saying: "I will have a foreign-handed foreign policy"; "I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family"; "More and more of our imports come from overseas"; and "The most important job is not to be governor, or first lady in my case".

Looking cheerful and dressed in a dark grey business suit with a salmon-coloured tie instead of his trademark uniform, Castro laid to rest recent rumours that he may have died by delivering a four-hour 20-minute speech in which he railed against White House efforts to get rid of him.

Bush on Monday toughened enforcement of a ban on travel to Cuba by Americans, while a White House commission drew up plans to speed a post-Castro transition on the Caribbean island nation. Havana says Bush is catering to Florida's Cuban-Americans to win their votes in the November election.

Top Bush administration officials last month accused Castro of trying to destabilise Latin America by stirring up anti-American sentiment in the region in alliance with Venezuelan populist President Hugo Chavez.

The bearded Cuban leader, aged 77 and in power since a 1959 revolution, charged two weeks ago that Bush was plotting to have him assassinated and planning to invade Cuba.

Cuban authorities have told the population to get ready to defend their country with guerrilla tactics. "Everything is prepared," Castro said to the economists, among them Nobel Prize winner Daniel McFadden of the United States.

The Cuban leader said Washington would have to invade quickly after his death if it wanted to put an end to his revolutionary government.

Castro said he would continue to govern Cuba "until his last breath. ... The dead man is not dead yet. They have not killed him," he said.

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