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Article 1

Fidel Castro meets with more than 100 Americans before leaving for Asia

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HAVANA (AP) - Dressed in black suit and tie and occasionally checking his wristwatch, President Fidel Castro left his Asia-bound plane waiting almost four hours to the tarmac late Wednesday so he could chat with more than 100 visiting Americans.

American farm representatives in town for a U.S.-Cuba business summit and a group of women business leaders from Seattle, Washington, gathered in Havana's Conventions Palace Wednesday evening for a lively question and answer session with the communist leader, participants in the meeting said Thursday.

"He kept saying: 'I have to go, I have to go,' but I don't think he wanted to leave!" said Jeri Rice, board member of the Center for Women & Democracy at the University of Washington. "He was really enjoying himself."

Castro excused himself shortly before 10 p.m. to go to the airport, said Rice. Castro was scheduled to visit the communist countries of Vietnam and China, and to attend a summit of the 114-nation Non-Aligned Movement in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Monday and Tuesday.

Laurie McDonald Jonsson, board chairman of the Center for Women & Democracy, said Castro was simply fulfilling a promise he made her group during its first to Cuba last year.

"I told him we were going to come back, and he said that if we did, he would meet with us," Jonsson recalled Thursday.

Leading the women's group was Sen. Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington state whom Castro personally escorted to the airport last year in his black Mercedes Benz.

Shortly after that January 2002 visit, Cuba purchased a shipment of apples, peas and lentils from Washington state under an exception to the U.S. trade embargo. Cuba in late 2001 agreed to begin buying American food under an exception to the U.S. trade embargo that allows the transactions on a cash basis.

"She was definitely here," Jonsson said of Cantwell, denying earlier reports that the senator had flown back to Washington on Wednesday after the Cancun, Mexico, partition of the **U.S.-Cuba Business Conference** on Monday and Tuesday.

Also in the group with Castro Wednesday night were Kansas Lt. Gov. John Moore and Iowa Agriculture Secretary Patty Judge, along with several other score of American farm representatives who flew here for the day after two days of meetings in Cancun.

Cuban officials said they were negotiating tens of millions of dollars worth of new food purchases with American farm representatives who attended the conference.

The Cuban officials said their country has bought or contracted to buy about US\$250 million in U.S. farm products since late 2001 and expects to buy an accumulated total of as much as US\$400 million by the end of 2003.

Also visiting Havana this week was a farm delegation from North Dakota, led by U.S. Sen. Kent Conrad, a Democrat from that state.

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