

The Miami Herald

April 11, 2012

Circulation: 160,505

MIAMI MARLINS

Miami Marlins manager Ozzie Guillen suspended for 5 games over Fidel Castro comments

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A contrite and at times emotional Ozzie Guillen apologized for more than an hour Tuesday for having said “I love Fidel Castro,” categorizing the remark — which ignited a firestorm in Miami’s Cuban exile community and beyond — as “stupid.”

But just 100 yards from where the Miami Marlins’ fiery manager delivered his astonishing mea culpa, hundreds of protesters made it clear that for them, he can’t take back what he said. A raucous rally outside Marlins Park was the most visible evidence that Guillen and his employers still have much work to do to win over their most vocal critics.

The Marlins, whose new taxpayer-funded stadium sits in the heart of Little Havana, took the first step toward trying to heal the rift Tuesday by announcing Guillen will be suspended for the next five games, beginning with Wednesday’s contest in Philadelphia.

“I feel as though I have betrayed the Latino people,” Guillen told reporters at a packed news conference, which was televised nationally. “I’m very embarrassed, very sad and I’m very, very, very sorry.”

Guillen, the 48-year-old Venezuelan skipper, will not collect a paycheck while suspended; instead, the team will donate about \$150,000 to human-rights charities, The Miami Herald has learned. The ballclub never considered firing Guillen, who was notified of his suspension during a frank conversation with team owner Jeffrey Loria Monday night, said Marlins President David Samson.

Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig contacted the Marlins to express his “extreme disappointment” over Guillen’s remarks, Samson said, although the league is not expected to take further action.

That’s not nearly enough for Jay Fernandez, who joined the 200-person protest organized by the anti-Castro group Vigilia Mambisa just outside the stadium’s gates. Watching Guillen’s news conference on a jumbo screen and chanting in Spanish, “Liar! Liar! Get rid of him,” the picketers were largely in agreement: If Guillen stays, their business goes.

“If you screw up, you go,” said Fernandez, a Cuban émigré who said his wife had five family members killed by the Castro regime. “This is the major leagues for players as well as coaches. If you’re insensitive to a community, you have to pay.”

Shouted Dulce Martinez, a spokeswoman for Vigilia Mambisa: “You are a Communist rat, Guillen!”

But Miami native Danny Parra, 22, said he could see both sides. A Marlins’ season-ticket holder, Parra is Cuban American. Although he understands why people are angry, he believes Guillen’s comments — first published on Time magazine’s website — were misinterpreted.

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“The way I saw it, he didn’t mean it as if he actually loved Fidel Castro,” Parra said. “He was bewildered someone like him could be around for so long. I feel like he didn’t have the words to express that.”

During his bilingual news conference, Guillen said exactly that. He said he did not mean to praise Castro when he spoke to the Time reporter, and that the interview, conducted in English, his second language, did not reflect his true feelings. In a statement released Tuesday, Time stood by its reporting.

“It was a personal error,” said Guillen, who met with prominent Cuban Americans Tuesday to offer a personal apology. “I do not admire [Castro]. I do not love him. I assure you. I hate him for the harm he has caused many Latinos, and many people in his country, directly or indirectly.”

Far beyond the Cuban-American community, Guillen’s remarks have quickly become Miami’s No. 1 topic of conversation this week, from office break rooms to the Twitterverse.

Nora Sandigo, executive director of the Nicaraguan American Fraternity, said Guillen’s comments to Time were inappropriate — Guillen also said he respects Castro — and she did not believe his apology was sincere.

“People aren’t going to let themselves be fooled,” Sandigo said. “I think his position is very clear; someone like that can’t change his position from one day to the next.”

But Jose Colina, president of Veppex, an organization for Venezuelan political exiles, said Guillen should be given a second chance.

“He was sufficiently embarrassed,” Colina said. “Let him do what he knows how to do. That is, manage a team to take them to the World Series.”

For the next week, Guillen will be managing nothing but his idle time and his bank account, which will be a bit lighter than he had imagined when he signed a four-year, \$10 million contract to lead the Marlins last September.

Guillen said he will address his ballclub Wednesday before turning over his duties to interim manager Joey Cora, the Marlins’ bench coach. The Marlins didn’t fire Guillen because they “believe that everybody deserves a second chance,” Samson said.

Gaby Sanchez, the team’s first baseman and only Cuban-American player, agreed, saying, “It was good to see him apologizing and trying to set everything straight.”

Sanchez said Guillen’s suspension “stinks ... especially with the way we’re playing now. We just have to move forward and keep playing baseball.”

Responding to an online query from The Herald, Marlins fan George Hyppolite echoed the “second-chance” theme.

“Guillen should have known that his comments would incite an impassioned negative response from the very community that he and the rest of the Marlins organization hopes will fill that new stadium in the Cuban-American hotbed of Little Havana,” said Hyppolite, 21, of Miami.

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“Yet I hope Cuban Americans realize that the United States, a country that they hold so dear for giving Cuban exiles a second chance, ensures its people have the freedom to hold and announce beliefs that may be different from others.’ ”

With the county mayoral election just a few months off, some politicians seized the moment to weigh in, too. Miami-Dade Commission Chairman Joe Martinez, who is challenging incumbent Mayor Carlos Gimenez, had called for Guillen’s resignation on Monday. On Tuesday, as prospective voters protested, a plane hauling a banner that read “Joe Martinez apoya a la comunidad” (“Joe Martinez supports the community”) circled above.

Martinez said he didn’t watch Guillen’s apology, but still believes the five-game suspension was too light.

Miami Commission Chairman Francis Suarez, a possible candidate for city mayor, said Guillen’s apology seemed sincere but that the manager still would be better off leaving because the community doesn’t think the sanction went far enough. “What I saw outside [the stadium] were raw emotions, not content with the five days,” said Suarez, who went to Marlins Park Tuesday.

And in Hialeah Tuesday night, people in the chambers burst into applause when the City Council unanimously passed a resolution calling for Guillen’s “immediate” firing.

Others marveled at the public relations disaster the team is facing just days after riding high on Opening Night at its glittering new ballpark.

“The Marlins as an organization has taken every possible step to ruin a potentially long-term relationship with this community by shooting themselves in the foot time and time again,” said Tadd Schwartz, a Miami-based marketing professional. “From a PR standpoint, this team simply does not get it. The fact that Ozzie was not immediately terminated is a sign of that.”

Mayor Gimenez, who on Monday condemned Guillen’s remarks but stopped short of calling for his resignation, said Tuesday the Castro fiasco isn’t just about Guillen.

“It’s about an organization that’s been in a bunch of controversies,” the mayor said. “As an organization the Marlins need to earn back the respect of the community. Only time will tell is a five-day suspension is enough for the community.”