

NSA surveillance critics to testify before Congress

Democrat congressman Alan Grayson says hearing will help to stop 'constant misleading information' from intelligence chiefs

By: Paul Lewis - July 26, 2013

Congress will hear testimony from critics of the National Security Agency's surveillance practices for the first time since the whistleblower Edward Snowden's explosive leaks were made public.

Democrat congressman Alan Grayson, who is leading a bipartisan group of congressman organising the hearing, told the Guardian it would serve to counter the "constant misleading information" from the intelligence community.

The hearing, which will take place on Wednesday, comes amid evidence of a growing congressional rebellion NSA data collection methods.

On Wednesday, a vote in the House of Representatives that would have tried to curb the NSA's practice of mass collection of phone records of millions of Americans was narrowly defeated.

However, it exposed broader-than-expected concern among members of Congress over US surveillance tactics. A majority of Democrat members voted in support of the amendment.

Grayson, who was instrumental in fostering support among Democrats for the the amendment, said Wednesday's hearing would mark the first time critics of NSA surveillance methods have testified before Congress since Snowden's leaks were published by the Guardian and Washington Post.

"I have been concerned about the fact that we have heard incessantly in recent weeks from General Keith Alexander [director of the NSA] and Mr James Clapper [director of National Intelligence] about their side of the story," he said. "We have barely heard anything in Congress from critics of the program.

"We have put together an ad hoc, bipartisan hearing on domestic surveillance in on the Capitol. We plan to have critics of the program come in and give their view – from the left and the right."

Grayson said the hearing had bipartisan support, and was backed by the Republican congressman Justin Amash, whose draft the amendment that was narrowly defeated.

"Mr Amash has declared an interest in the hearing. There are several others who have a libertarian bent – largely the same people who represented the minority of Republicans who decided to vote in favour of the Amash amendment."

The hearing will take place at the same time as a Senate hearing into the NSA's activities. That will feature Gen Alexander and possibly his deputy, Chris Inglis, as well as senior officials from the Department of Justice and FBI.

The simultaneous timing of the hearings will lead to a notable juxtaposition between opponents and defenders of the government's surveillance activities.

"Both Congress and the American people deserve to hear both sides of the story," Grayson said. "There has been constant misleading information – and worse than that, the occasional outright lie – from the so-called intelligence community in their extreme, almost hysterical efforts, to defend these programmes."

Although not a formal committee hearing, Grayson's event will take place on Capitol Hill, and composed of a panel of around a dozen members of Congress from both parties.

Grayson said those testifying would include the American Civil Liberties Union as well as representatives from the right-leaning Cato Institute.

"They are both going to come in and make it clear that this programme is not authorised by existing law - and if it were authorised by existing law, that law would be unconstitutional," Grayson said.

The congressman added that Glenn Greenwald, the Guardian journalist who first revealed details of the surveillance programmes leaked by Snowden, had also been invited to testify via video-link from his base in Rio.

"Even today, most people in America are unaware of the fact the government is receiving a record of every call that they make, even to the local pizzeria," Grayson said.

"I think that most people simply don't understand that, despite the news coverage, which my view has been extremely unfocused. There has been far too much discussion of the leaker, and not enough discussion of the leak."