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Cuban dissident Yoani Sanchez gets rock star reception on Capitol Hill

By: Maria Recio – March 19, 2013

Arriving in an imposing black SUV on the plaza in front of the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday morning, an hour ahead of President Barack Obama, who was attending a separate event, the unassuming dissident Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez created a sensation among politicians, the news media and tourists alike.

It was a Washington welcome worthy of a foreign dignitary.

Three Cuban-American members of the House of Representatives from Florida – Republicans Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Diaz-Balart, and Democrat Joe Garcia – waited for her by the Capitol steps in front of a half-dozen television cameras. They handed her a bouquet of tulips and escorted her to a session with other lawmakers.

Obama, meanwhile, was on Capitol Hill for the annual St. Patrick's Day lunch with the prime minister of Ireland, the speaker of the House and members of Congress.

Their paths didn't cross.

Sanchez, who's 37, has become the face of a new generation of pro-democracy Cubans through her large online following at her blog, Generation Y. She's on an international tour, financed by several nonprofit organizations, after getting unexpected permission to travel outside Cuba.

"I am not here as a politician," said Sanchez at a meeting organized by Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., and Garcia in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. "I am not here as a journalist. I am here as a citizen."

She said Cuba was evolving from within but that the recent changes President Raul Castro had implemented "from on high" – of limited business ownership and more travel – were minimal and the international community shouldn't confuse them with real change.

"I am here to share and talk about the Cuba that is undergoing change and how we can help make that move forward," she said.

Government forces detained and beat Sanchez last October for her coverage of the deaths of Cuba's top dissidents, Oswaldo Paya and Harold Cepero, in a car accident last year on the island. The incident has galvanized international human rights advocates. The circumstances of the crash have been disputed. The driver said recently in a published interview that their car was hit from behind.

"It is time for the international community to insist that a thorough investigation occur," said Nelson, who sent a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Sanchez spoke on the 10th anniversary of what's known as Cuba's Black Spring, when the communist government rounded up 75 independent journalists and dissidents to suppress opposition. She said that thanks to Twitter, she knew that even as she was speaking out against her government Tuesday, it was continuing its intimidation of dissidents. But their numbers have grown, she said.

She called for more people-to-people contacts and the use of technology – such as cellphones, iPads and DVDs – and social media, which have given voice to the Cuban opposition.

Despite the bipartisan nature of Tuesday's event, there was one very large issue on which the blogger and the members of Congress didn't fully agree: maintaining the more than 50-year-old U.S.-imposed economic embargo of her country.

Sanchez has been very public about a need to lift the embargo, but in her meetings with lawmakers, at Florida's state office on Capitol Hill and at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research center, she downplayed the controversy and spoke of Cuba's big tent of opposition, with many points of view.

"I respect all approaches, like the embargo," she said. "I know they are born of love of Cuba. The fact is that I have grown up under a system that is used to blaming all problems on the lack of materials, on the lack of everything. The embargo is always used as an excuse."

Asked about her safety when she returns home, Sanchez said she expected to be monitored and harassed, although her visibility and international profile would protect her "like a shield" for a while, and that she'd continue to speak out until then.

Later Tuesday, the embassy of the Czech Republic was to hold a reception in Sanchez's honor. On Wednesday, she'll meet with Cuban-American Sens. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Robert Menendez, D-N.J., as well as with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

The State Department on Wednesday will present Sanchez with the International Woman of Courage Award, which it granted her in absentia in 2011 after Cuba barred her from traveling to the U.S. Next month, she'll visit Miami.