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Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez to meet lawmakers in Washington, D.C.

Juan Carlos Chavez March 19, 2013

NEW YORK CITY -- Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez will be received Tuesday in Congress after completing a busy agenda of meetings and forums in New York City about technology and social networking.

Recognized as one of the most important voices in the domestic opposition in Cuba, Sánchez will arrive in Washington bearing a critical message about the situation on the island and the urgent need to support the work of independent journalists and human rights activists, among others.

“This will be one of the most important meetings of the tour,” said Sánchez, 37. “In general, the trip has been full of surprises. I have received many hugs but have also heard many shouts.”

In Washington, Sánchez will meet at 10:30 a.m. with Rep. Joe García, D-Miami., one of the principal figures behind the blogger’s visit to the Capitol, and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Miami, a fierce opponent of any rapprochement with the Cuban government.

Later, at 11 a.m., Sánchez will take part in a political reception attended by other lawmakers familiar with the Cuban issue, such as Democrats Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston and Albio Sires of New Jersey, and the Miami Republican Mario Díaz-Balart.

García stressed the importance of the opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions about the Cuban reality with Sánchez.

“To me, it is a great honor to acknowledge a person as brave as Yoani Sánchez,” García told El Nuevo Herald. “Her efforts in favor of freedom and human rights in Cuba have inspired millions of people around the world, including me.”

Sánchez's stopover in Washington also was a source of satisfaction for Ros-Lehtinen. She said that Sánchez's meeting with her and her colleagues in Congress will help them understand in greater detail the living conditions on the island.

Sánchez's trip abroad coincides with a new monthly report on the detentions against the opposition, issued by the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and International Reconciliation, based in Havana.

The commission, headed by activist Elizardo Sánchez, reported in February more than 500 "temporary detentions."

In that context, Ros-Lehtinen said that Sánchez's blog and her writings have "focused" attention on the "awful" human rights conditions in Cuba. The lack of guarantees has been a source of concern for broad-based organizations such as Amnesty International. That group has concluded that the Cuban government continues to uphold laws intended to prevent dissidents and human rights advocates from exercising the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

"My colleagues in Congress are willing to listen to speakers who bring first-hand accounts on how the regime represses freedom of expression and disrespects human rights," Ros-Lehtinen said.

Recently, two other Cuban oppositionists and former political prisoners, Luis Enrique Ferrer García and Normando Hernández, traveled to Washington. Both described their experiences in two hearings before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

No representative of the Cuban government attended those hearings. The island's authorities do not acknowledge the commission's competence because it is part of the Organization of American States, which Cuba refuses to rejoin.

Sánchez's agenda in Washington includes discussions with analysts and students at Georgetown University and the Cato Institute. In both forums, Sánchez will have a new opportunity to explain the constant harassment to individual freedoms, the monopoly on information and the current political scenario.

Sánchez will take advantage of her visit to the capital to pick up the State Department's 2011 International Award to Women of Courage. The prize was granted to her in absentia during a ceremony presided over by First Lady Michelle Obama.

Monday morning, Sánchez spoke with students and professors at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York City. As in the past two public sessions held by Sánchez, four people tried to interrupt the blogger's presentation with shouts in favor of the Cuban government. They were removed without violence, while most of the attendees applauded Sánchez warmly.

At the session, Sánchez expressed her wish that the government of Raúl Castro end soon. She said that the Castro brothers have steered the country at their whim for more than five decades.

"The Cuban system has neither built nor prepared a generational handover. It has behaved like a hungry Saturn who devours his children," Sánchez said, referring to the Greek mythological figure who feared he'd be overthrown by his children. "All the young people who throughout 50 years gained some popularity were expelled and some were imprisoned."