

U.S. senators condemn beating

Several U.S. senators blasted the attack on Cuban dissident Martha Beatriz Roque and demanded that Cuba allow its citizens to exercise their rights.

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Pushed by a hotel lobby of a different kind, several U.S. senators -- including two who are considering running for president -- on Monday condemned Cuba for the "beating and intimidation" of well-known dissident Martha Beatriz Roque in late April.

The effort began in Coral Gables' Biltmore Hotel, where -- in separate visits -- many of the senators got word of the attack on Roque from activists including Ana Navarro, the former Nicaraguan ambassador to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, whose boyfriend, Gene Prescott, is the hotel's proprietor.

"It was all a matter of coincidence and really talking to them with the truth," Navarro said. "When policy makers are faced with the truth, they take action."

U.S. senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Bill Nelson of Florida led the charge to introduce a resolution Monday blasting the attack on Roque and demanding that Cuba allow its citizens to exercise their rights. Also listed as co-sponsors are potential presidential candidates Democrat Joseph Biden and Republican John McCain.

"The Senate condemns the brutality of the regime of Fidel Castro toward Martha Beatriz Roque, a 61-year-old woman in frail health," the resolution reads. It also says the Senate "calls on the regime of Cuba to release the hundreds of political prisoners still held today and to stop the intimidation of dissidents and their families."

If approved, it would be a rare boost to an individual in Cuba's dissident movement, said Mauricio Claver-Clarone, director of the anti-Castro U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC.

"Few people outside of Miami can name a leading Cuban dissident," said the Washington, D.C.-based Claver-Clarone. "The hope here is to personalize it."

The push for the resolution started with a quick hallway rendezvous at the Biltmore.

Late last month, Nelson, who is up for reelection, was there for a meeting, Navarro said, when she and several members of the U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC pulled him aside in a hallway and told him about Roque. "He was immediately supportive and promised to do something," Navarro said. "He understood the need to express solidarity and was touched by this woman's story."

A few days later, Lieberman met with members of the PAC at the Biltmore, where they informed him about Roque, Navarro said. Lieberman, a supporter of U.S. sanctions against Cuba, also sat next to Navarro on his flight back to Washington, and got an earful about Roque, she said. Last week, Biden was at the Biltmore, when Navarro brought up Roque, she said.

Roque was leaving her Havana home April 25 to meet with Michael Parmly, head of the U.S. Interests Section, when a mob of Cuban government supporters swarmed her, knocked her down, punched her and dragged her.

During a call to a Miami radio station after the incident, Roque made an emotional plea for international support.

"They kicked me, a strong young man punched me in the eye with his fist," she said. "I thought my eye had popped out. They knocked me down and dragged me . . . The world must know this. To my brothers and sisters in Miami, please let the world know."