

# Radio, TV Martí face a congressional probe

## A congressional investigation of TV and Radio Martí is slated for early 2007, a Massachusetts Democrat said.

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Congress early next year will investigate allegations of mismanagement and political cronyism at taxpayer-funded Radio and TV Martí, a ranking Democrat said Tuesday.

Rep. William Delahunt, D-Mass. -- slated to chair the oversight and investigations subcommittee for the House International Relations Committee -- said he will move to hold hearings on the Martí in late January or early February. His comments came a day after Radio Mambí, WAQI-AM (710), and Azteca América, WPMF-TV 38, each began carrying an hour of Martí programming daily for payment.

"This will be a priority," said Delahunt, who was in Cuba this week as part of a congressional delegation. "There's mismanagement . . . that really demands a thorough review."

Government-funded media such as the Martí cannot broadcast on U.S. airwaves because their mission is to present the U.S. viewpoint to foreign audiences. However, there are loopholes in the law: Time on an AM transmitter can be leased to circumvent signal-jamming, and TV Martí can be "inadvertently" picked up by U.S. viewers as long as it reaches Cuba.

The Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which oversees the Martí operation, portrays the contracts as just another way to reach Cubans on the island. Radio Mambí's signal can reach Cuba under certain circumstances, and WPMF-TV is carried on DirecTV, which some Cubans can receive via a pirated signal.

Delahunt said the U.S. government is essentially hiring the stations to reach mostly local audiences, funded with taxpayer money. The six-month contracts call for Mambí to be paid \$182,500 and WPMF \$195,000. WPMF general manager Enrique Landín said Channel 38 also will sell commercials during the Martí newscasts -- which enraged Delahunt.

"Now we're subsidizing private commercial stations," said Delahunt, who called the Martí politically motivated boondoggles. The Martí will receive \$37 million this year. "This is outrageous."

The criticisms didn't surprise U.S. Rep. Lincoln Díaz-Balart, who earmarks funds for the Martí operation.

"I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for Delahunt . . . to stop trying to help the Cuban dictatorship," Díaz-Balart said through his chief of staff, Ana Carbonell.

Larry Hart, a spokesman for the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the government arm that oversees the Martí, said the charges of political patronage were "ridiculous."

Both Radio Mambí and WPMF-TV were selected after a media market survey, Hart said. Although many government contracts are awarded through competitive bidding, the law allows some vendor contracts to be issued as "sole source" -- without bidding -- under circumstances such as urgency or a unique service. In this case, Hart said, time was of the essence after Cuban leader Fidel Castro transferred power to his brother Raúl in July.

"We have been redoubling efforts to get through," Hart said.

Two other South Florida stations were approached, WSBS-TV 22 and WJAN-TV 41, but neither was willing to lease the blocks of time Martí was seeking. Representatives at WSBS-TV had no comment, and calls to WJAN were not returned.

## **HIGHLY RATED**

Radio Mambí is one of the highest-rated radio stations in South Florida and is known for its strong anti-Castro stance. Popular Mambí commentator Ninoska Pérez-Castellon is also a board member and spokeswoman for the hard-line Cuban Liberty Council.

Mambí is the only Spanish-language AM station that carries a 50,000-watt signal through the night and is able to reach Cuba, Hart said.

Most AM stations reduce their signal at night when there are fewer listeners.

Hart acknowledged that the Cuban government's Radio Rebelde transmits on the same frequency as Mambí -- 710 AM. But he said the jamming does not block Mambí in all locations or at all times, and that the signal gets through, particularly on the northern coast.

Representatives at Univisión, Mambí's corporate owner, had no comment.

WPMF-TV is a small, low-power TV affiliate of the Azteca América network, owned by Mexico's TV Azteca. The station is carried on local cable systems, as well as DirecTV and over the air. It was selected because it is carried on DirecTV Latin America, which is pirated in Cuba, Hart said.

Landín and Jorge De Cárdenas, a marketing consultant to the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, are former business partners. State corporate records show De Cárdenas and Landín were partners in Creative Developers, a real estate investment company that dissolved in 1980. They also had a 30-year business relationship, De Cárdenas said, when Landín sold radio time to De Cárdenas, then an advertising executive, to place ads for his clients.

De Cárdenas said a 2003 consultant report for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting recommended using radio stations around the Caribbean to transmit Radio and TV Martí. That never happened, but the idea remained.

Calls to Pedro Roig, director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, weren't returned Tuesday.

## **VIOLATION OF LAW**

Former Director Herminio San Roman, who ran the operation from 1997 to 2001, said the Martí transmissions via a Miami station, WCMQ, in the late 1980s for several months. But an attorney for the U.S. Information Agency found such transmissions violated the law, he said. He could not provide a copy of the opinion.

This is not the first time the U.S. government has contracted U.S.-based radio stations to air its propaganda, said John Nichols, associate dean of Pennsylvania State University's College of Communications.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the government leased time on private radio stations in South Florida and as far away as New Orleans to beam Voice of America into Cuba.

And in September 1987, Radio Mambi and WQBA-AM La Cubanísima rebroadcast a Martí interview with Cuban defector Florentino Azpillaga Lombard after U.S. officials did not make him available to U.S. media.

Nichols noted that using the Miami stations to broadcast overseas violates international law because they are licensed to serve only U.S. audiences. Cuba has long complained to international telecommunications authorities about the Martí.

"This gives more fuel to the Cuban government's position," he said.

The hearings are almost certain to be politically charged. Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Arizona, a longtime critic of the Martí, said Tuesday that the transmissions over the Miami stations appeared to be legally fuzzy.