

Congressman revives Radio, TV Martí debate

A U.S. congressman -- frequently critical of U.S policies on Cuba -- promises congressional hearings on the anti-Castro, government-funded Radio and TV Martí.

The Miami Herald
Jun. 24, 2007

U.S. Rep. Bill Delahunt renewed his call for congressional hearings to examine the funding and content of Radio and TV Martí, visiting Miami during a week that included a passionate debate in Washington over federal funding of programs pushing for democracy in Cuba.

The Massachusetts Democrat has been an outspoken critic of the Bush administration's policy toward Cuba, and advocates loosening the trade embargo and travel restrictions to the island.

"If we truly embrace freedom, we have to do it in a way that makes a difference," said Delahunt.

He said an examination of Radio and TV Martí's operations and finances are part of an overall need to revamp attitudes toward U.S.-Cuba relations.

"Those who have stayed the course have not made a difference in 50 years. With all due respect to them, they are the indispensable allies of Fidel Castro," he said.

Delahunt, who brought with him members of the congressional investigative staff, met with Radio and TV Martí officials including Pedro Roig, head of the U.S. Office of Cuba Broadcasting.

Alberto Mascaró, chief of staff for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, said the congressman came at the behest of Radio and TV Martí officials.

"It's important to note that we actually invited the congressman to visit us," said Mascaró, who described the talks as "cordial" and said network officials were confident in the transparency and efficiency of the operation.

"He did mention some things he'd like to have hearings on," he said. "That's the American system and the right of Congress to do."

Delahunt singled out finances, content, and whether Cubans on the island are able to hear the broadcasts as reasons for the hearings.

Delahunt also described the meeting as amicable, and said Roig was "very forthcoming" and pledged his cooperation.

As a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the chair of the Oversight and Investigations subcommittee, he had promised congressional hearings last year shortly after Democrats won control of Congress.

Delahunt, who previously said the hearings would take place by February, said Saturday there is no set date for the hearings, but they should take place "in a couple of months."

The Miami-based Radio and TV Martí, which in recent years have faced allegations of mismanagement and political cronyism, have cost taxpayers more than \$250 million in the past decade.

The anti-Castro television and radio stations, overseen by Office of Cuba Broadcasting, were created to beam pro-democracy messages to people on the island. Congress approved \$33 million for the agency's budget last week, including \$5 million a year for an airplane to broadcast TV Martí to the island, one of the tactics used to avoid Cuban authorities jamming the broadcast signal. Critics, including Delahunt, have long accused the network of airing one-sided broadcasts, awarding plum jobs to political allies, and question whether the TV broadcasts -- frequently jammed by the Cuban government -- are worth the money.

STEADY IMPROVEMENT

Earlier this week, a draft report from the State Department concluded the broadcasts had improved significantly in recent years.

The official report has not been released, but the draft noted that anecdotal evidence suggests the broadcasts were reaching a larger audience on the island, although it did not provide any concrete numbers.

U.S. Rep Lincoln Díaz-Balart said Saturday he supported any congressional examination of Radio and TV Martí, but said the Massachusetts congressman's broader criticisms of Cuba policy were off-base.

"With regard to transparency, it's good to show these are important and effective programs," said Díaz-Balart, who said he hoped the review will help Radio and TV Martí improve their broadcasts. "But with regard to Mr. Delahunt, he has become one of the most constant advocates of the same position shared by the Cuban dictatorship."

Added Díaz-Balart: "He really has become predictable in his extremism."

HEATED DEBATE

Last week also brought a heated debate onto the House floor over the future of U.S. funding of democracy programs in Cuba.

The vote was the first on Cuba legislation under a Democrat-controlled Congress. On Thursday, the House approved a major increase in money for U.S. programs that support dissidents on the island.

President Bush requested almost \$46 million for Cuba democracy programs for the 2008 fiscal year, five times the amount allotted for 2007. A group of Democrats had earlier cut the aid back to \$9 million, arguing there was not enough oversight to justify the money would be well-spent. They noted a government report that cited abuse in the programs, such as the purchase of cashmere sweaters and pricey chocolates.

But a successful amendment proposed by two Cuban-American congressmen -- Díaz-Balart, a Republican, and New Jersey's Albio Sires, a Democrat -- brought the dollar amount back to the original proposed by the president.