

Miami Herald

Posted on Sat, Feb. 01, 2014

Cuban students at MDC condemn arrests, say they like Miami

By Juan O. Tamayo

jtamayo@EINuevoHerald.com

Seventeen Cuban students on unique scholarships at Miami Dade College Friday condemned a crackdown on dissidents this week — then talked about everything from the good Cuban food in Miami to their worries about returning to the island.

“We are not removed from what happens in our country,” said a group statement denouncing the crackdown, reported to have topped 250 brief detentions before and during a summit that drew several presidents to Cuba.

The heads of government attending the two-day Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States this week should have condemned the detentions and called for democracy, said the statement read at a news conference at MDC.

The 17 youths, most of them linked to the opposition, enrolled in MDC last month under an unprecedented scholarship program for students from a country where communist authorities often expel dissidents and even their children from universities.

Ranging in age from 18 to 37, and in interests from rappers to lawyers and graffiti artists, for many of them the trip to Miami for the “We are One People” scholarships was their first time out of Cuba.

“This is an incomparable experience. We are living in a free and democratic country,” said Henry Constantin, a dissident blogger from the eastern city of Camaguey who was expelled from two universities in 2006 and 2008.

But some of the students are concerned about their return to Cuba after the six months of studying English, computers, business and social studies, Constantin added, because the island’s government does not approve of the scholarship program.

“The return could be a bit traumatic, because of what awaits us there,” he said.

Asked after the news conference how they are faring in Miami, several of the students said they were greatly enjoying their temporary home.

“We Cubans do not feel like foreigners in Miami,” said Miguel Molina, who was expelled last year from his second year of medical studies in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba because of his activism in the dissident Cuban Patriotic Union.

Constantin said the group was “stunned by the amount of Internet available” — Cuba ranks last in the hemisphere in Internet access — and was surprised that more than a dozen journalists turned up for their news conference.

Several of the students broke into extra-wide smiles when asked how they had found the shopping and the food in Miami.

“Here, there is everything that is not found in Cuba,” said Eleanor Calvo Martinez, director of the Citizen’s Observatory against Discrimination, an anti-racism group not recognized by the government.

Overall the food is “very good and very cheap,” added Luis Moya, the son of Ladies in White leader Bertha Soler and former political prisoner Angel Moya. A pound of pork in Havana costs 22 pesos, close to a day’s wage for the average Cuban.

“I feel like I am in my own home,” said Moya.

Constantin said he even believed that Cuban food in Miami was better than the one back on the island, because of better products, more seasonings “and cooking with more care.”

Also in the group are graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado, known as El Sexto; Raudel Collazo of the rap group Escuadrón Patriota (Patriot Squadron); Moya and Soler’s daughter Lienys; and SaylÍ Navarro, daughter of former political prisoner Felix Navarro.

Independent lawyer Laritza Diversent said she and other members of the group have long and exhausting days in class until 5 p.m. and then have to review their lessons, which leaves them with limited free time.

The Miami-based Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba is paying for the students’ transportation, housing and food — estimated at \$12,000 to \$15,000 for the six months. It received a \$3.4 million, three-year grant from the U.S. government in 2011 to help civil society groups in Cuba, and gets more than \$600,000 from private donors each year.

Cuba has outlawed cooperation with the U.S.-funded programs, saying they amount to thinly veiled attempts to topple the government. It also regularly brands dissidents as “mercenaries” on the U.S. payroll.

One professor at MDC, the nation's largest college with 175,000 students, said the scholarships amounted to “affirmative action” for students discriminated against in Cuba because of their politics. He asked for anonymity.

Cuban universities are all state-run, and one of the many slogans of the Castro revolution holds that “the university is for revolutionaries.”