

Senate committee probes 'Cuban Twitter' USAid ZunZuneo programme

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- Foreign relations committee asks for all records
- Users in Cuba did not know origin of social-media network



Senate foreign relations committee chairman Robert Menendez said he supported the USAid 'Cuban Twitter' programme. Photograph: J. Scott Applewhite/AP Photograph: J. Scott Applewhite/AP

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The Senate foreign relations committee on Thursday asked the US Agency for International Development (USAid) to turn over all records about the Obama administration's [secret "Cuban twitter" programme](#), as part of a broader review of the agency's civil-society efforts worldwide.

The request included copies of messages the US government or its contractors transmitted to subscribers in [Cuba](#), who never were told about Washington's role in the primitive, text message-based cellphone service that was meant to undermine Cuba's communist government and was the subject of an Associated Press investigation last week.

"I'd like to get a full sense of all your democracy programmes, beyond the internet, as well, because we're going to judge all of those in context," committee chairman Robert Menendez told USAid administrator Rajiv Shah during a hearing.

Menendez, who said he supported the “Cuban twitter” network, known as ZunZuneo, said he may ask for separate reviews by other auditing agencies, including inspectors general and the Government Accountability Office. He said he will advocate that pro-democracy programmes continue to be run by the agency.

Menendez made the surprise request after Senator Jeff Flake separately asked for data about the programme, under the auspices of Congress's oversight responsibilities.

"Will we have access to all the tweets or the messages that were sent by USAid or its contractors in full so we can judge here?" Flake asked. "Because we have to provide oversight, whether we authorise programmes or fund them."

The USAid administrator told Flake the agency does not have most of them but promised to turn over any documents it can obtain from contractors.

"You'll have access to what we are able to gather," Shah said.

Menendez, who made the request without a committee vote, said the review will consider whether USAid's pro-democracy programmes in Cuba were consistent with those run in other foreign countries, and whether USAid should operate what it has since acknowledged was a "discreet" programme.

The AP investigation revealed that the US government took great care to keep its role in the now-defunct ZunZuneo hidden. The programme was publicly launched in 2010, using foreign bank transactions and computer networks. The AP also revealed that draft messages produced were overtly political, despite earlier US government statements that the service had a more neutral purpose.

In four congressional hearings over three consecutive days, lawmakers have debated whether USAid, which is best known for its humanitarian mission, should be running such a cloak-and-dagger mission instead of government spy agencies like the CIA.

Based on internal documents and interviews, AP reported that Cuban subscribers to ZunZuneo were neither aware it was created by the US government nor that American contractors were gathering personal data about them, in the hope that the information might be used someday for political purposes.

Senator Marco Rubio strongly defended ZunZuneo as a platform Cubans could use to communicate with each other amid government-imposed internet restrictions. Rubio said he wants to restart the operation, which ended in 2012, although, he acknowledged: "Maybe USAid is not the perfect agency for this."

Rubio asked the USAid administrator: "This wasn't an intelligence programme. We weren't spying on the Cuban government, were we?"

Shah replied: "No."

USAid publicly launched ZunZuneo shortly after the 2009 arrest in Cuba of an American contractor, Alan Gross. He was imprisoned after traveling repeatedly to the country on a separate, clandestine USAid mission to expand internet access using sensitive technology that only governments use.

Flake said the Senate's review should consider whether such "discreet" programs endanger aid workers like Gross.

"Do we want to continue to fund programs like this that, in my view, might put USAid contractors or individuals from other countries, including Cuba, that participate in this programme, in danger?" Flake asked. He said USAid could argue whether the programme was legally authorised but said its involvement was "ill-advised".

In defending the programme, the [Obama administration](#) and critics of Cuba's Castro government have pointed to federal audits and budgetary checks over the roughly \$20m that the Washington agency spends on Cuban democracy initiatives.

But the author of the GAO study Shah cited repeatedly this week said he wasn't asked about examining "the wisdom of conducting such activities".

The Senate committee's request to review the programme's paperwork, two years after it was shut down, came despite the White House's assertions that Congress was fully informed all along about ZunZuneo.