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Cuba: Blogger denied freedom to travel outside Cuba

Amnesty International calls on the government of Cuba to lift the travel restrictions on Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez, preventing her from travelling to New York to receive an international journalism award.

“The immigration office has just confirmed that they maintain the prohibition on letting me leave the country”, wrote Yoani Sánchez on her Twitter page on 12 October.

This is the fourth time that Yoani Sánchez has been refused permission by the authorities to travel outside Cuba in the past two years.

Yoani Sánchez was awarded a special citation for journalistic excellence by the board of the Maria Moors Cabot Prize, the oldest international award in journalism, for her writing on the Generation Y website which receives 1 million hits a month.

In Generation Y, Yoani Sánchez writes about daily life in Cuba. She was due to accept the award on Wednesday at Columbia University, in New York city.

“The Cuban authorities often deny exit visas and bar from leaving their country those who, like Yoani Sánchez, express critical views of the government,” said Amnesty International’s Kerrie Howard, Americas Programme deputy director.

“Restricting freedom of movement by denying an exit visa to Yoani Sánchez constitutes an unnecessary punitive measure for the exercise of freedom of expression,” Kerrie Howard said.

In May, the Cuban authorities denied Sánchez permission to fly to Madrid to accept an award for digital journalism.

She is known as an outspoken advocate for freedom of expression and unrestricted access to internet. Her blog, Generaion Y has been intermittently blocked by the authorities and cannot currently be read within Cuba.

Background Information

Cubans wishing to travel abroad must obtain an exit visa called a tarjeta blanca (white card). Although Raúl Castro announced in 2008 that the government would ease travel restrictions for its citizens, the situation relating to dissidents does not appear to be changing: Independent journalists, human rights defenders and political opponents have often been restricted from leaving Cuba to attend events abroad.

In 2008, blogger Yoani Sánchez was barred from leaving Cuba to receive the 2008 Ortega y Gasset Prize for digital journalism. In 2005, representatives of a group formed by relatives and friends of 75 people

imprisoned in a March 2003 crackdown, the Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White), were not allowed to travel to receive the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, one of the leaders of the Varela Project, was awarded the Sakharov prize in 2002 and was not allowed to travel to Strasbourg to receive it.