

The Snowden Affair: Denying President Morales' Plane Fuel Seen As Attempted Assassination

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, September 29, 2013

On July 2, the United States put pressure on several European countries to prevent a plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales from landing to refuel at any of their airports. The excuse for this unprecedented denial of landing rights was the unfounded claim that Morales was hiding American whistleblower Edward Snowden on board his presidential jet. The plane was running dangerously low on fuel by the time it was eventually permitted to land at an airport in Vienna. There is reason to believe this was actually an attempt to kill Morales as well as Snowden.

Morales had been attending a conference on energy in Moscow, where Snowden had taken refuge to escape arrest by the U.S. government for exposing details of its secret surveillance of American citizens. Morales' plane was scheduled to fly from Moscow to Lisbon in Portugal to refuel, but shortly after it took off from Moscow, Portugal suddenly revoked his landing permit without giving any reason. This prompted a planned change of route to refuel at Spain's Canary Islands, but Spain also denied Morales' plane landing rights as did France and Italy.

By this time, the Bolivian president's jet was running dangerously low on fuel, imperiling his life and the flight crew's. Finally the plane was allowed to land at Vienna, Austria. The president of Bolivia had survived what could justifiably be termed a combined U.S.-European assassination attempt.

It is hard to imagine a more deadly, hostile, and insulting treatment of a head of state which incredibly continued at the airport in Vienna, where Spain's ambassador to Austria actually demanded to search President Morales' plane. Morales of course refused to submit to such a humiliating breach of his diplomatic immunity.

José Manuel García-Margallo, Spain's foreign minister, later admitted that the decision to hamper Morales' journey home was based on "a tip" that Edward Snowden was on board. "They told us that the information was valid, that he was inside," the minister explained. He did not divulge the source of this specious information, but no one doubts that it came from Washington.

After finally arriving back at La Paz, Morales lost no time putting the blame for his ordeal and narrow escape squarely on the United States. "It was an open provocation," he said, "and not just to the president of a Latin American nation, but to the entire continent. They used the agent of North American imperialism to frighten us."

Bolivian Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera described the intolerable mistreatment of Morales as "the most shameful page of the political history of some European countries, not

only because they violated international agreements, but also because they violated their own dignity as countries. It was verified that the colonies today are not in America and Africa, but rather, sadly, in Europe.”

Many other Latin American governments condemned the endangerment of Morales’ life by the U.S. and European countries. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro declared that “The European people have seen the cowardice and the weakness of their governments, which now look like colonies of the U.S.” José Mujica, Uruguay’s president, made clear that “We are not colonies any more. We deserve respect, and when one of our governments is insulted, we feel the insult throughout Latin America.”

Trying to discourage countries from granting Snowden asylum in such an arrogant and ruthless manner, the U.S. ended up causing the opposite effect: Snowden has been offered asylum by Venezuela and Nicaragua, as well as Bolivia, and he has been allowed to stay in Russia for a full year.

The question remains whether the U.S. government’s real objective was not merely to harass and insult Morales, but actually to assassinate an outspoken political opponent of U.S. imperialism and a highly progressive leader of the Latin American Revolution. And, if the Obama administration really did believe that Snowden was on the same plane, causing it to crash would have had the added “bonus” of eliminating a whistleblower who had exposed Washington’s massive clandestine spying on millions of U.S. citizens.

The U.S., after all, had also tried to kill President Chavez of Venezuela, a close ally of Morales, as well as other progressive Latin American presidents. Since his election in 2005 and again in 2009, Morales has not only liberated Bolivia from prolonged U.S. domination, but actually expelled the U.S. Ambassador, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and the U.S. Agency for International Development — mainly for their involvement in attempts to overthrow him. He has nationalized Bolivia’s rich oil and gas sector and has drastically reduced the role of foreign corporations in the country, especially those based in the U.S.

“The U.S. action against Morales can certainly be considered an attempt to assassinate him,” Bolivian-Canadian activist Juan Valencia told me in Toronto. “The U.S. acted purposely against Morales because of his anti-imperialist stance. Washington was telling Bolivia that it will not tolerate those who challenge a world order in which the U.S. decides what other countries will do.”

Asad Ismi is the CCPA Monitor’s international affairs correspondent. He is author of the radio documentary “The Latin American Revolution” which has been aired on 40 radio stations reaching an audience of 33 million people. This article is the 21st in a series on this subject. All these articles have now been published together by the CCPA as an anthology which can be ordered from the Centre.

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