

US escalates threats against governments considering asylum for Snowden

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Global Research, July 08, 2013

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

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Top US officials escalated their threats over the weekend against any government that grants asylum to Edward Snowden, the source of leaks detailing illegal government surveillance programs directed at the population of the United States and the entire world.

On Friday, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro said that the country would offer Snowden “humanitarian asylum,” and the leaders of Nicaragua and Bolivia both indicated that Snowden could receive asylum in those countries as well. The statements came in the wake of the forced grounding of Bolivian president Evo Morales’s plan last week under suspicions that Snowden may have been on board.

An anonymous State Department official said over the weekend: “There is not a country in the hemisphere whose government does not understand our position at this point.” The official asserted that granting Snowden asylum “would put relations in a very bad place for a long time to come.” The official continued, “If someone thinks things would go away, it won’t be the case.”

Representatives of both Democrats and Republicans jumped in with threats. “Clearly such acceptance of Snowden to any country...is going to put them directly against the United States, and they need to know that,” Senator Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey, declared on NBC’s Meet the Press Sunday.

Congressman Mike Rogers, the Republican head of the House Intelligence Committee, told CNN that the US should consider responding to asylum-granting governments with economic sanctions, so as “to send a very clear message that we won’t put up with this kind of behavior.”

These threats are in line with the international campaign of thuggery and intimidation launched by the Obama administration in response to the revelations of secret programs that involve the collection of communications on hundreds of millions of people all over the world.

Regarding the downing of Morales’s plane, more information has emerged making clear that the US was behind the action. Latin American media have reported that a US diplomat spread rumors that Snowden was on board the flight, prompting the efforts to force a landing. The Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* reported that US Ambassador to Austria William Eecho “claimed with great certainty that Edward Snowden was onboard.”

Maduro reported that he was personally informed by a European minister that “it was the

CIA that gave the order to the air traffic authorities, which gave the alert that Snowden was going in the plane.” While the details surrounding the forced landing remain unclear, it is in blatant violation of international law.

The downing of Morales’s plan makes clear that Snowden will face enormous obstacles as he attempts to travel to any asylum-granting country, even if he receives approval from its government.

If he accepts asylum in Venezuela, Snowden would still need to get there from his current location in the Russian airport. The commercial flight from Moscow to Venezuela stops in Cuba and passes through European airspace. It would thus be in danger of being forced to land by European governments acting at the behest of the United States.

For its part, Russia is pushing for Snowden to leave quickly. Prominent Russian parliamentarian Alexei Pushkov, who is very close to the Kremlin, tweeted Sunday: “Venezuela is waiting for an answer from Snowden. This, perhaps, is his last chance to receive political asylum.”

“He needs to choose a place to go,” said Russian deputy foreign minister Sergey Ryabkov.

Maduro said late Saturday night that Snowden has until today to contact the Venezuelan government in response to the asylum offer.

Russia has made clear that it is unwilling to sour relations with Washington over the issue, and that Snowden would have to accept censorship—an end to his exposures of mass spying—as a condition for staying in Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin offered asylum to the whistleblower, but Snowden declined after Putin demanded that he cease “harming our American partners.”

Moreover, any asylum granted from Venezuela or any other Latin American country must be seen highly conditional. Latin American heads of state are using the occasion to burnish their images as opponents of US imperialism. However, all these countries are heavily susceptible to US pressure and dependent on the US economy.

In spite of his tough talk, Maduro has made clear that he wants to improve relations with the United States. At the same time, the leader of the main opposition party in Venezuela, Henrique Capriles, has denounced the offer of asylum.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has offered asylum, but it was qualified with the phrase “if circumstances permit.” Political analyst Carlos Fernando Chamorro told the *Wall Street Journal*, “It is an ambiguous statement, that is consistent with his rhetoric of provoking the US and in practice doing everything to maintain good relations.”

A former Nicaraguan official close to Ortega expressed similar views, saying, “It’s his way of telling the Americans, I was asked to do this, but I’m not going to do it. I know him; it is a way that he can show off his revolutionary credentials, but he won’t do anything in the end.”

Ecuador too has indicated that it would consider asylum, but the country carried out an abrupt about-face after pressure from the US. The Ecuadorian government initially granted Snowden a travel document from Hong Kong to Moscow, but this was later rescinded and declared a “mistake.” It has since said that Snowden would have to travel to Ecuador first before any asylum request was considered.

For their part, every European government has refused Snowden’s petitions for asylum. The same European regimes that collaborated with the US in the illegal downing of Morales’s flight have, on countless occasions, allowed the CIA to use their airspace for “extraordinary rendition” of prisoners to black sites to be tortured. These governments have established their own mass spying programs and function, along with the US government, as political machines in defense of the ultra-wealthy and dominant banks and corporations.

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