

Latin American Governments blast Hijacking in Snowden Manhunt

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Five South American heads of state joined with Evo Morales in Cochabamba Thursday to denounce the US-instigated grounding of the Bolivian president's plane. The action was ostensibly taken in response to faulty intelligence that the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, who has exposed massive illegal spying by the NSA, was on board the aircraft.

On Friday, speaking on the occasion of Venezuela's Independence Day, President Nicolas Maduro said he would offer asylum to Snowden. "In the name of America's dignity... I have decided to offer humanitarian asylum to Edward Snowden," he told a televised military parade. It is not clear whether Maduro is attaching any conditions to the offer.

Also on Friday, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega appeared to make a conditional offer of asylum. Speaking at a public event, he said, "If circumstances permit it, we would receive Snowden with pleasure and give him asylum here in Nicaragua."

The meeting on Thursday, which included half of the heads of state of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, its acronym in Spanish), was convened after Morales returned to Bolivia aboard a presidential jet that had been detoured from its approved flight path Tuesday and forced to land in Vienna, Austria, where it remained for nearly 14 hours.

Some three hours into the plane's flight from Moscow, the governments of France, Portugal, Italy and Spain refused it permission to travel through their airspace, compelling it to make the emergency landing in Vienna due to dwindling fuel. The actions of these governments was in violation of international treaties and air traffic agreements and placed the lives of Morales and other senior Bolivian officials on board at risk.

The joint declaration issued following the meeting between Morales and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, Uruguayan President Jose "Pepe" Mujica and the president of Surinam, Desi Bouterse, accused the European powers of turning the Bolivian president into "virtually a hostage" and setting "a dangerous precedent in relation to existing international law."

It went on to demand that the governments of France, Portugal, Italy and Spain provide explanations for their actions and issue "public apologies" for the "grave acts" committed against Morales.

The statement denounced the extraordinary forcing down of a head of state's aircraft in mid-flight as an example of "neo-colonial practices" and condemned "illegal acts of espionage that threaten citizens' rights and the friendly co-existence between nations."

The statement made no direct mention, however, of Edward Snowden, the target of the extra-legal US manhunt, whose reported presence on Morales' plane was the motive for the European governments' bellicose actions.

The former NSA contractor is reportedly still trapped in the transit zone of Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, where he arrived on June 23. According to WikiLeaks, he has made applications for asylum to 27 countries, many of which have summarily rejected his request.

The governments of Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela have indicated that they would consider his bid for asylum. The Ecuadorean government, however, made a sharp shift from its earlier cooperation with Snowden. Having initially provided him a safe-passage document for his flight from Hong Kong to Moscow, it then declared the move a "mistake" and rescinded the document. Quito has since insisted that Snowden would have to be on Ecuadorean soil before asylum could be considered.

Venezuela's President Maduro, meanwhile, announced that his government would await "the reaction of the world" before deciding on the asylum request.

While in Moscow attending a summit of gas-exporting nations, Morales gave the most forthright statement on Snowden's appeal, stating that Bolivia was "ready to accept those who disclose espionage." Asked directly if he would grant asylum, Morales replied, "Yes. Why not?"

It is by no means clear whether the US really suspected that Snowden was on Morales' aircraft—which departed from a different airport than the one where the ex-NSA contractor has been confined—or whether it sought through an act of international gangsterism against the Bolivian president to intimidate anyone considering aiding Snowden.

Spain's foreign minister, José Manuel García-Margallo, in an interview with Spanish state television, TVE, rejected the demand from UNASUR, insisting that his government had no reason to apologize.

"They told us he [Snowden] was inside" the plane, he said, while claiming that Spain's overflight authorization had not been rescinded, but merely expired after France and Portugal refused to allow Morales' plane to enter their airspace. "The reactions of the European countries was because of the information that they gave us that he was inside," he added.

While García-Margallo did not volunteer who "they" were, he was asked directly whether the Spanish government had been in telephone contact with US officials regarding the incident. "That information remains secret," he replied.

Morales has charged that while he was detained on the ground in Vienna, the Spanish ambassador to Austria came to the airport and asked to be invited onto the airplane "to have a coffee." The Bolivian president refused, charging that the request amounted to a thinly veiled attempt to search the aircraft for Snowden. "I am not a criminal," he declared.

For its part, Washington has refused to comment on the widespread charges that it instigated the forcing down of Morales' plane, which amounts to an act of war between nations.

Venezuela's President Maduro stated that a European minister "told me personally 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."

Both Bolivia and Venezuela have rejected demands from Washington that they extradite Snowden should he land on their soil. The extradition request arrived in La Paz just a day after Morales' ordeal in his flight back from Moscow.

The Bolivian foreign ministry described the request as "strange, illegal and unfounded," given that Snowden wasn't even in the country.

For his part, Morales threatened to expel the US diplomatic mission and shut down its embassy. "We don't need the pretext of cooperation and diplomatic relations so that they can come and spy on us," said the Bolivian president.

Venezuela's Maduro said that his government had received a similar request from Washington. He rejected it saying that Washington has "no moral authority" to pursue Snowden after he exposed "crimes against humanity."

"They have no moral authority to request the extradition of a young man who exposed the illegality under which the Pentagon, the CIA and the power of the US work," said Maduro. "I reject any request they are making for extradition."

The Venezuelan president added that the US government should first comply with Venezuela's demand for the extradition of Luis Posada Carriles, who is wanted in Venezuela for the 1976 terrorist bombing of a Cuban passenger plane that killed all 78 people aboard. The US has rejected the request and effectively provided the Miami-based Cuban exile terrorist with political asylum.

Bolivia can make a similar case, with Washington dismissing its demands for the extradition of the country's former president, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, who is wanted not for exposing government crimes, as in the case of Snowden, but rather for massacring scores of unarmed demonstrators.

Snowden's life remains in grave danger, with the Obama administration demanding his return to face espionage charges, which carry a potential death penalty. As the Morales episode makes clear, Washington is prepared to kill him or those it believes are aiding him.

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