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Putin Says U.S. Has Effectively Trapped Snowden

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN**

MOSCOW — President Vladimir V. Putin told an audience of students on Monday that the United States had effectively trapped Edward J. Snowden, the fugitive former intelligence contractor, on Russian territory by frightening countries that otherwise might have accepted him. When Mr. Putin insisted that Russia did not want Mr. Snowden to cause damage to the United States, the students burst out laughing.

Mr. Putin made the remarks on Hogland Island in the Gulf of Finland, where he was reviewing projects of the Russian Geographical Society. His remarks concerning Mr. Snowden, who announced on Friday that he would formally request asylum in Russia, came during a meeting with student researchers who were attending an archaeological camp on the island.

Russian officials said on Monday that they had not yet received an application from Mr. Snowden, and Mr. Putin did not say outright whether he would grant a request from him. But the president clearly signaled that it remained a possibility, with a reference to his prior statements that Mr. Snowden could apply for asylum in Russia provided that he stopped publishing classified material harmful to the United States.

Mr. Snowden arrived at Sheremetyevo airport outside Moscow on a flight from Hong Kong on June 23, and he has been there ever since, living in the transit zone of the airport with the consent of the Kremlin and apparently with some support from the Russian authorities.

On Friday, Mr. Snowden met at the airport with lawyers, Russian officials and representatives of human rights organizations. His visitors were given special passes into the transit zone, which is technically outside Russia's border controls, by the Russian Customs Service, and the meeting was arranged with the help of the airport management. A bus took the visitors from one part of the terminal to another, where they met with Mr. Snowden in a room with a door marked "Staff only."

Mr. Putin, in his remarks to the young researchers on the island, jokingly described Mr. Snowden as an unwanted Christmas present.

"He arrived on our territory without an invitation," Mr. Putin said. "He didn't fly to us; he fled from other countries. But only when it became known that he was in the air, our American partners, in fact, stopped him from flying further."



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“They themselves scared all other countries; no one wants to take him, and in this way they themselves in fact blocked him on our territory. Such a present for us for Christmas.”

Mr. Putin said that Mr. Snowden was aware that to apply for asylum in Russia, he must first stop his political activities — presumably all leaking of classified information that could harm the United States. But given Russia’s long intelligence rivalry with the United States, it is hard to believe that Mr. Putin has not been enjoying Washington’s discomfort over Mr. Snowden, and even his student audience laughed at the suggestion.

“We have a certain relationship with the U.S., and we don’t want you with your political activities damaging our relationship with the U.S.,” Mr. Putin said, describing his view toward Mr. Snowden. “He said no,” Mr. Putin continued.

“You are laughing,” he told the students. “But I am serious. He said, I want to continue my activities, I want to struggle for human rights, that the U.S. violated some international law, interference with privacy, and my goal is to struggle against this. We said: Only, not with us. We have other things to struggle against.”

“Judging by the latest statements, he is changing his position somehow,” Mr. Putin said. “But the situation has not yet become clear.”

The Obama administration has been pressing Russia not to grant asylum to Mr. Snowden, and it has also been pressuring other countries not to take him, particularly in Latin America, where Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua have said they are willing to grant him asylum.

President Obama spoke with Mr. Putin by telephone on Friday. Neither side has disclosed precisely what was said about Mr. Snowden during the call, but the White House has made clear that in its view, American interests are being harmed as long as Mr. Snowden is at large and not back in the United States to face criminal charges.

Mr. Putin said on the island that he thought Mr. Snowden would move on from Russia. “As soon as an opportunity to move somewhere emerges, he will do it, of course,” he said.

But in response to a question, Mr. Putin ultimately said that he did not know what Mr. Snowden would do. “How can I know?” he said. “This is his life, his fate.”

