



EUROPE

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Edward Snowden re-emerges for Moscow airport meeting

Fugitive US intelligence leaker Edward Snowden has met human rights groups and lawyers at a Moscow airport, in his first appearance in three weeks.

He said he sought asylum in Russia as he was unable to travel to Latin America, where he has been offered asylum.

Mr Snowden had dropped a previous request after Moscow said he could stay only if he stopped the US leaks.

The Kremlin repeated its earlier condition on Friday.

"Mr Snowden could hypothetically stay in Russia if he first, completely stops the activities harming our American partners and US-Russian relations and, second, if he asks for this himself," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

US President Barack Obama and Mr Putin spoke by telephone late on Friday, but details of what they said were not immediately available.

The White House had said the scheduled conversation would include discussion of Mr Snowden and other issues.

Earlier, White House spokesman Jay Carney criticised Russia for being willing to consider a request from Mr Snowden for political asylum, saying Moscow was giving him a platform for propaganda.

Russian lawmaker Vyacheslav Nikonov, who attended the meeting at Sheremetyevo airport, said Mr Snowden had not specified whether he was seeking temporary or permanent asylum.

"He said that he needs asylum in Russia to freely move around," Mr Nikonov said. "It suits him perfectly well staying in the airport because everything is fine here. The only thing he wants is to be given freedom of movement."

Mr Snowden is wanted by the US on charges of leaking secrets about US surveillance schemes. The former CIA contractor has been stuck in transit since arriving in Moscow from Hong Kong on 23 June.

He is unable to leave the transit zone without asylum documents, a valid passport or a Russian visa, none of which he reportedly has.

The American has sent requests for political asylum to at least 21 countries, most of which have turned down his request. However, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela have indicated they could take him in.

But some European countries are likely to close their airspace to any plane suspected of carrying the fugitive.

'Unlawful campaign'

On Friday, [Mr Snowden said in a statement](#) he formally accepted all offers of support or asylum he had already received "and all

others that may be offered in the future".

But he added that the US and some European countries had "demonstrated a willingness to act outside the law".

"This unlawful threat makes it impossible for me to travel to Latin America and enjoy the asylum granted there in accordance with our shared rights," Mr Snowden said in a statement released on the Wikileaks website.

He also asked the rights groups and lawyers present at the airport meeting to assist him "in requesting guarantees of safe passage from the relevant nations in securing my travel to Latin America, as well as requesting asylum in Russia".

Mr Snowden had invited around 10 activists, including Sergei Nikitin, the head of Amnesty International's Russia office, prominent Moscow lawyer Genri Reznik and Russia's presidential human rights ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin.

Mr Lukin was later quoted by Interfax news agency as saying Mr Snowden should be given refugee status instead of political asylum in Russia. "It would be better if the UN or Red Cross did it," he said.

Last month, Mr Snowden had already tried to apply for Russian asylum but President Putin said at the time he would only be welcome if he stopped "his work aimed at inflicting damage on our American partners".

A large press scrum had gathered at the airport ahead of Friday's meeting, which was closed to journalists. Ms Lokshina released a photo showing Mr Snowden at the talks. The fugitive, who is reportedly staying at the airport's Capsule Hotel, had not been seen in public in nearly three weeks.

He had sent his meeting request via an email message, which instructed those attending to bring a copy of the invitation and identification papers because of tight security.

Mercosur anger

The status of asylum as well as allegations of US spying on Latin American governments were on the agenda as members of the South American trade bloc, Mercosur, gathered in Uruguay.

A Mercosur closing statement, quoted by Reuters news agency, said: "We repudiate any action aimed at undermining the authority of countries to grant and fully implement the right of asylum."

Members of Mercosur are going to recall their ambassadors from a number of European countries for consultations after a row about the closure of their airspace to Bolivian President Evo Morales last week, AFP news agency reported.

His plane, returning from Moscow, was forced to land in Austria after France, Portugal, Italy and Spain barred it from their airspace - apparently because of suspicions that Mr Snowden was on board.

Mr Snowden's leaking of thousands of classified US intelligence documents have led to revelations that the National Security Agency is systematically seizing vast amounts of phone and web data.

They have also indicated that both the UK and French intelligence agencies allegedly run similarly vast data collection operations, and the US has been eavesdropping on official EU communications.

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