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## Bolivian president's plane forced to land in Austria in hunt for Snowden

By [Kathy Lally](#) and [Juan Forero](#), Updated: Wednesday, July 3, 8:12 AM

MOSCOW — Bolivian President Evo Morales's plane, forced to land in Austria because of suspicions that American fugitive [Edward Snowden](#) was on board, was permitted to fly home Wednesday, Bolivian and European authorities said.

The search for Snowden turned into a major diplomatic fiasco, with Bolivia, Venezuela and several other Latin American countries lashing out at the United States and accusing it of having strong-armed European countries into redirecting the official Bolivian presidential plane.

The U.S. government had no immediate comment.

Snowden, who revealed secret U.S. surveillance programs and fled to Hong Kong, then Moscow, to stay beyond American reach, was not aboard the plane, an irate David Choquehuanca, Bolivia's foreign minister, told reporters after the Bolivian delegation landed in Vienna.

"We don't know who invented this lie," he said from Bolivia's capital, La Paz.

Morales's plane, ferrying him home from a conference in Moscow, was redirected to Vienna late Tuesday after France and Portugal refused to allow it to enter their airspace, Bolivian and Venezuelan officials said.

Authorities in Austria confirmed that the plane was searched and that Snowden, 30, was not on the flight. There was no indication that he had left Moscow, where he has been in diplomatic limbo for more than a week.

"Our airport staff have checked it over and can assure you that no one is on board who is not a Bolivian citizen," Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger told reporters at the Vienna airport, Reuters news agency reported. He called it a "voluntary examination." But Morales had told reporters that no Austrians had been on board.



Bolivia's government responded angrily to the incident. Vice President Alvaro Garcia announced that the ambassadors of France and Italy and the consul for Portugal would be summoned to the Foreign Ministry in La Paz on Wednesday to explain what he called "the abuse" of redirecting Morales's plane.

He said the representatives of those countries need to explain "these disagreeable, terrible and abusive events."

The incident also raised the ire of governments and organizations across Latin America, which cast Morales's troubles as a dire violation against a small country orchestrated by Washington. Even Colombia's leftist rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), called the rerouting of the plane "an infamy."

Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary general of the Organization of American States, which is based in Washington and is made up of governments across the Western Hemisphere, called for an explanation from the European countries that Morales's government accused of blocking his plane's flight path.

"Nothing justifies an action of such disrespect from the highest authorities of a country," said Insulza, who is from Chile.

Choquehuanca said Morales's plane was an hour from French airspace when it was told it could not enter. "Portugal has to explain to us," he said. "France has to explain to us why they canceled" flight authorization.

The Portuguese Foreign Ministry said in a statement Wednesday that Portugal informed the Bolivians on Monday afternoon, a full day before Morales's flight, that it would not allow the Bolivian plane to land in the country for unspecified "technical reasons" but that it would allow an overflight.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that two officials with the French Foreign Ministry said that Morales's plane also had authorization to fly over France. They would not comment on why Bolivian officials said otherwise. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to be publicly named, according to ministry policy.

The wire service, citing an unidentified official in Vienna, reported that the flight crew on Morales's aircraft asked controllers at the Vienna airport for permission to land because the plane needed more fuel to continue its journey.

The aircraft took off from Vienna shortly before noon Wednesday, AP reported. Spain said the plane would be allowed to refuel in the Canary Islands, although a Foreign Ministry official declined to comment on a claim by Bolivia that the permission was contingent on allowing authorities to search the plane, the wire service said.

The White House, CIA and State Department all declined to comment on the situation involving the Bolivian aircraft. But the latest twist seemed to signal that U.S. authorities have been able to marshal support from European countries in what has been a feverish pursuit of the former National Security Agency contractor.

It also underscored how Snowden has settled still deeper into isolation as one country after another has rejected his appeals for asylum since his disclosure of a trove of highly secret documents.

The diverting of Morales's plane is sure to fan anger against the United States, which is trying to play down new revelations of spying against European allies while trying to win support to corral Snowden even from countries such as Russia, Bolivia and Venezuela, which are sharply at odds with the Obama administration.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elias Jaua called the incident over Austria “an attempt on Evo Morales’s life.” He said it was a sign of how far “the empire” — a reference to the United States — and its “lackeys” would go “to hunt down a young man who has only said the truth.”

Bolivia’s defense minister, Ruben Saavedra, who was on the flight, also blamed the United States, telling Bolivian media that “this proves with clarity an attitude of sabotage and plotting by the United States, pressuring European government.” He said that Italy, too, had barred Morales’s plane from its airspace.

For the United States, Bolivia clearly emerged as a possible sanctuary for Snowden, who was stuck in Russia after the United States revoked his passport before his arrival in Moscow on a flight from Hong Kong on June 23.

In an interview earlier Tuesday in Moscow on the [state-financed RT news channel](#), Morales said he would consider asylum for Snowden. “Yes, why not?” he said. “Bolivia is there to welcome personalities who denounce — I don’t know if it’s espionage or control. But we are here.”

After living unseen in the transit zone of Moscow’s Sheremetyevo International Airport for a week, Snowden sent out 19 asylum requests Sunday night, according to WikiLeaks, the anti-secrecy organization that has been advising him. On Monday, [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) said he could stay here if he stopped leaking information harmful to the United States, an odd offer that Snowden refused, a presidential spokesman said Tuesday morning.

That left [a list of countries](#), from Austria to Venezuela, to which Snowden had sent appeals. By Tuesday evening, at least eight of them — including Ecuador and Iceland, which had been asked earlier — had said an applicant must be in the country to be considered. At least three had said no, and others had not replied.

Some countries avoided him out of friendship with the United States, others for political or economic reasons. Ecuador, which at first had appeared enthusiastic, grew less so after Vice President Biden made a call to the president. To be granted asylum, Snowden would have to count on a country to defy the United States. Of those on his list, Bolivia and Venezuela were looking like the best possibilities. Both are hostile to the United States, and the presidents of both countries have heaped praise on Snowden.

Morales, who said his government had not received a formal request for asylum, in 2008 expelled the U.S. ambassador from his country and ended anti-drug cooperation with Washington.

“Bolivia, as well as Venezuela and Ecuador,” he said, “are exposed to constant surveillance from the U.S. empire.”

Venezuela’s president, Nicolás Maduro, was also in Moscow, which had convened a meeting of gas-exporting countries, and Russian media speculated that he would take Snowden to Venezuela on his official plane.

Maduro smiled at that suggestion. “We will take with us numerous agreements on investments in the oil and gas sector,” he said. He defended the former National Security Agency contractor, however, saying that Snowden had neither killed anyone nor planted a bomb and that he deserved protection. “He only told the world a large truth to prevent war,” Maduro said. “The U.S. capitalist elite are trying to control the world and are spying on friends, foes and the entire planet.”

The Obama administration on Tuesday acknowledged contacting foreign governments on Snowden’s asylum list,

but a State Department spokeswoman dismissed the leaker's claims that Washington has mounted a campaign to pressure anyone against offering him sanctuary.

"We have been in touch, as we have been for several days now, with a broad range of countries that could serve as either transit spots or final destinations," said the spokeswoman, Jennifer Psaki. "And what we've been communicating is, of course, what we've been communicating publicly — that Mr. Snowden has been accused of leaking classified information. He is somebody that we would like to see returned to the United States."

Late Tuesday, Maduro was preparing to fly on to Belarus — without Snowden, a member of his entourage told the Interfax news agency. Nothing could be done, the official told Interfax — the Venezuelan plane was at a different airport.

After his nine days in limbo, Snowden's situation looked desperate. Officials here have portrayed themselves as powerless in the case because Snowden is outside their jurisdiction in the transit zone and needs a passport or other document before he can travel onward, but some Russians find that disingenuous. Russian officials always find a way to do exactly what they want, they say.

And that has raised questions about what is going on behind the scenes. Pavel Felgenhauer, a longtime military analyst and observer of the KGB's successor, the Federal Security Service, or FSB, offered this speculative scenario: Russia must be trying to see whether it can recruit Snowden.

In an interview Tuesday, Felgenhauer said that when Putin told reporters that Snowden could stay if he stopped talking about the United States, Putin was saying that Snowden had to make a choice. Putin was telling Snowden that he would be working for Russia, not for one of the newspapers publishing his leaks, Felgenhauer said.

The reason Snowden has not been seen is that border guards, who stand at the door when an international flight lands and who work for the FSB, would have hustled him off to a safe room in the airport, or even a safe house elsewhere, Felgenhauer said. Snowden probably did not use a ticket he had to Havana on June 24, the analyst said, because his minders told him the United States would force the Aeroflot flight down when it flew over U.S. territory.

"He's cornered psychologically," Felgenhauer said. "You bring the guy to the breaking point to see if he's real. By now he's probably afraid of everything, convinced he'll be hunted down like bin Laden if he leaves here."

As Felgenhauer put it in a Novaya Gazeta article this week, "Snowden remained in Sheremetyevo like a suitcase with a broken-off handle: a pain to carry and a shame to throw away."

Forero reported from Bogota, Colombia. Joby Warrick in Washington contributed to this report.

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