

THE AUSTRALIAN

US fury over Edward Snowden's asylum in Russia

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FUGITIVE US intelligence leaker Edward Snowden has stepped out of the Moscow airport where he was marooned for over five weeks, after Russia granted him one year's asylum to the fury of the United States.

Snowden slipped out of Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport in a cloak-and-dagger operation overseen by his Russian lawyer but unnoticed by the hordes of media trying to follow his every move.

The White House said it was "extremely disappointed" that the former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor was given asylum by Moscow and said it would now review the need for a US-Russia summit in September.

Snowden, 30, is wanted on felony charges by the United States after leaking sensational details of vast US surveillance programmes, but Russia has refused to extradite him.

The fugitive was whisked away in a taxi to an undisclosed location, leaving his lawyer to reveal that he had received temporary asylum in Russia just two weeks after making an application.

"Snowden has left Sheremetyevo airport. He has just been given a certificate that he has been awarded temporary asylum in Russia for one year," lawyer Anatoly Kucherena told AFP.

A spokeswoman for Sheremetyevo confirmed he had left the airport after 2pm local time. A grainy still image broadcast by Rossiya 24 television showed a young man with a rucksack -- apparently Snowden -- about to get into a car outside the airport.

In a statement released by the WikiLeaks anti-secrecy website, Snowden thanked Russia for giving him asylum and slammed the administration of US President Barack Obama for having "no respect" for international or domestic law.

"But in the end the law is winning," Snowden said.

Mr Kucherena, who had held several meetings with Snowden and helped him make his asylum application on July 16, added his new place of residence would be kept secret for security reasons.

"His location is not being made public for security reasons since he is the most pursued man on the planet. He himself will decide where he will go," Mr Kucherena said, adding Snowden was now in a "safe place".

Interviewed by Rossiya 24 television, Mr Kucherena held up a scanned copy of Snowden's asylum certificate. It was issued on July 31, valid until July 31 of 2014, and is complete with his fingerprint.

Mr Kucherena said that Snowden would eventually emerge into public view and give interviews to the press. But he said Snowden first required an "adaptation course" after so long in the transit zone.

He added that Snowden would be helped in Russia by unspecified "American friends" who would assist with the fugitive's security.

Meanwhile, the founder of Russia's most popular social network VKontakte -- 28-year-old Pavel Durov -- offered a job to Snowden as a programmer.

Snowden has been staying in the transit zone of the Sheremetyevo airport north of Moscow since he flew in from Hong Kong on June 23. Until now, he had never formally crossed the Russian border.

Awarding Snowden asylum status in Russia came two days after US soldier Bradley Manning was convicted of espionage for leaking US secrets to WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks, which has supported Snowden, said on Twitter that Snowden was still "under the care" of WikiLeaks British staffer Sarah Harrison who flew in with him from Hong Kong and is believed to have been

with him ever since.

"They departed from the airport together in a taxi and are headed to a secure, confidential place," WikiLeaks said.

The White House warned that the decision could prompt Mr Obama to cancel a planned visit to Moscow in September for talks with President Vladimir Putin ahead of the Saint Petersburg G20 summit.

"We're extremely disappointed," White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters. "We're evaluating the utility of a summit in light of this."

"This move by the Russian government undermines a long-standing record of law enforcement cooperation," he added.

Robert Menendez, chairman of the powerful US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, described the asylum as a "setback" for US-Russia relations.

"Edward Snowden is a fugitive who belongs in a United States courtroom, not a free man deserving of asylum in Russia," he said.

Mr Putin's foreign policy advisor Yury Ushakov rapidly sought to limit the potential diplomatic damage, saying that the situation should not affect relations with Washington.

"This situation is rather insignificant and should not influence political relations between Russia and the US," Mr Ushakov said.

The Russian strongman has so far made no comment. As the news of Snowden's flight from the airport broke, Mr Putin was holding a meeting on military cooperation with the visiting president of Tajikistan.