

On Africa trip, US president questioned on Snowden dragnet

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Questions about his administration's efforts to detain whistleblower Edward Snowden confronted US President Barack Obama at a press conference in Dakar, Senegal yesterday, at the beginning of a three-country trip to promote American interests in Africa.

Obama's answers revealed acute concerns about the political and diplomatic damage done to Washington by Snowden's revelations. They also underscored the US administration's determination to get its hands on the young man as soon as possible.

The former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor has released documents showing that the NSA and its partner agencies not only intercept and monitor the phone and Internet communications of millions of people in the US and across the world, but they also hack into and spy on the operations of China and many other governments.

The US president was asked several questions. Would he use US military assets to intercept Snowden if the whistleblower left Russia to find safe passage to Ecuador or another country? Had Obama spoken personally to Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin about Snowden's case? How "frustrated or angry" was he about "China's defiance and Russia's indifference" toward US demands for Snowden's extradition? Was he worried that Snowden could further damage US interests by releasing more documents?

Conscious of the worldwide support for Snowden's courageous stand and the alarm the NSA disclosures have caused in foreign capitals, Obama sought to downplay the issues. He denied that the US would "be scrambling jets to get a 29-year-old hacker" (Snowden turned 30 last week).

Obama also attempted to minimise the tensions created with China and Russia by his administration's

unfounded accusations that they had violated international norms by refusing to hand Snowden over to the US. He stated that he had not, and would not, talk to Putin or Xi himself about the matter.

"We've got a whole lot of business that we do with China and Russia," Obama said. "And I'm not going to have one case of a suspect who we're trying to extradite suddenly being elevated to the point where I've got to start doing wheeling and dealing and trading on a whole host of other issues simply to get a guy extradited."

Nevertheless, Obama admitted that "damage" had been done by the exposure of "the fact of some of these [NSA] programs." He added: "I continue to be concerned about the other documents that he may have." Obama alluded to the political and diplomatic fallout from Snowden's leaks, saying the US administration was trying to restore the "confidence" of "the American people and our international partners" about "how we operate in this regard".

The president also conceded that the US did not have an extradition treaty with Russia. That made "more complicated" the demand that the Russian government expel Snowden, who reportedly remains stranded in a transit area of Moscow airport.

While refusing to provide any details, Obama referred to "some useful conversations" with Putin's government. Obama stressed his "continued expectation" that Russia and countries that might provide Snowden political asylum recognise that "they should be abiding by international law". He added, "And we'll continue to press them as hard as we can to make sure that they do so."

Obama's remarks highlighted Washington's hypocrisy. According to the White House, one of the main purposes of his African trip is to "underscore our

longstanding investment in strong democratic institutions” and “support the aspirations of Africans for more open, and accountable, governance.” Yet, the US administration is out to railroad Snowden to jail for publicly exposing its own deeply anti-democratic operations, conducted secretly behind the backs of its citizens, to monitor the activities of ordinary people around the globe.

In reality, international law does not require the extradition of someone facing political charges, such as espionage, and permits the granting of political asylum. The true meaning of Obama’s “press them as hard as we can” was demonstrated when Ecuador yesterday renounced a trade pact with the US, accusing Washington of “blackmail” over Snowden’s request for asylum in that country.

“Ecuador doesn’t accept pressure or threats from anyone and doesn’t barter its principles and sovereignty or submit to mercantile interests,” President Rafael Correa announced. He accused the US of “a terrible case of massive espionage, both nationally and internationally, that clearly threatens the right to intimacy and the sovereignty of states.”

A day earlier, US Senator Robert Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, threatened to block renewal of trade preferences for Ecuador if it granted Snowden asylum. “Our government will not reward countries for bad behavior,” Menendez said. According to Ecuador’s government, scrapping the trade privileges, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars annually, would directly eliminate 40,000 jobs in Ecuador.

Ecuador’s communications secretary, Fernando Alvarado, said his government would offer Washington \$23 million—an amount similar to what the US provides under the trade deal—to provide human rights training to combat torture, illegal executions and attacks on peoples’ privacy.

At the same time, officials in Ecuador denied an earlier statement by WikiLeaks, which is working with Snowden, that Ecuador had granted Snowden travel documents so he could fly to the country. Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño warned earlier that it could take weeks to decide whether to grant asylum to Snowden.

Russian officials have hinted that they are pressuring Snowden to leave. President Putin said on Tuesday:

“The sooner he chooses his final destination, the better for us and for him.”

The US reportedly has sent a high-level team to Moscow, under William Burns, deputy secretary of state, to convince the Russian government that it has sufficient legal and practical reasons to expel Snowden into US custody.

Clearly, Snowden is in grave danger. He has not been sighted publicly since he arrived in Moscow from Hong Kong five days ago. Two days later, WikiLeaks warned: “Cancelling Snowden’s passport and bullying intermediary countries may keep Snowden permanently in Russia.”



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