

# Ecuador backpedals on asylum for Snowden

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US whistleblower Edward Snowden appears trapped in a transit zone at the Moscow airport, with plans to travel to Ecuador and seek political asylum disrupted by US government intervention to put pressure on Ecuadorean officials.

Snowden leaked documents exposing illegal and unconstitutional spying by the US National Security Agency on the telecommunications and e-mail of virtually every US citizen and much of the world's population. He has since been indicted by the Obama administration on espionage charges, has had his passport revoked, and is the target of an international dragnet mounted by Washington.

Snowden was residing in Hong Kong when he revealed himself several weeks ago to be the source of the revelations of NSA spying published by the British *Guardian* newspaper and the *Washington Post*. In the face of US demands for his extradition, he flew to Moscow after remaining in hiding in Hong Kong for several days. He was widely expected to fly from Moscow via Havana to Quito, the Ecuadorean capital. The Ecuadorean embassy in London issued him a travel permit at the urging of the whistleblower organization WikiLeaks.

The founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, has lived in the embassy for more than a year, seeking to avoid extradition to the United States, where he could face espionage charges, indefinite detention without trial as an enemy combatant, or even execution.

On Thursday, however, Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, rescinded Snowden's travel permit, saying it had been issued without authorization. Correa indicated that Snowden would still be welcome to seek asylum, but he took no action to make this possible.

Instead, he left it up to the whistleblower to make his way to safety. "The situation of Mr. Snowden is a complex situation and we don't know how he will solve it," Correa said.

The next day, US Vice President Joseph Biden called Correa in Quito to discuss the US campaign to seize Snowden and return him to the United States for prosecution on espionage charges. "He communicated a very courteous request from the United States that we reject the request" for asylum, Correa told the media.

In his weekly television address to the Ecuadorean population, Correa said that his government would not consider an asylum request until Snowden was on its soil or inside one of its embassies. "The moment that he arrives, if he arrives, the first thing is we'll ask the opinion of the United States," he said, a remark that does not bode well for the whistleblower.



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