

In hunt for Snowden, US forces Bolivian presidential jet to land

Peter Symonds
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In a flagrant breach of international law and diplomatic norms, the Obama administration, in collusion with its European allies, today forced a plane carrying Bolivian President Evo Morales to land in Austria, on suspicion that NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden was on board.

Morales, who had been in Moscow for energy talks, was returning home. Bolivian Defence Minister Ruben Saavedra, who was also on the flight, told CNN that Portuguese authorities refused to allow the plane to land at its scheduled stop in Lisbon for “technical reasons.”

The crew changed course for the Canary Islands but, as the plane was about to cross into France, French authorities denied permission, again citing “technical reasons.” On the advice of the crew, the plane, with its fuel low, landed in Vienna, where the Bolivian president remains. Saavedra also reported that Italy had refused permission for the plane to overfly its airspace.

“This is a hostile act by the United States State Department, which has used various European governments,” Saavedra told the media.

Austrian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Schallenberg told the Associated Press that Snowden was not with the Bolivian president and his party at the airport. The Bolivian vice president Alvaro Garcia Linera, however, said that since the plane landed, some European officials insisted that it had to be searched before allowing it to fly over their airspace.

While the Obama administration has not formally acknowledged any involvement, there is no doubt that it was behind the plan. Since Snowden left Hong Kong and arrived in Moscow’s Sheremetyevo airport, American officials have been engaged in intensive efforts to pressure Russia to hand him over and to exert further pressure on other countries not to grant him

asylum.

The decision to force down the plane has demonstrated the utter lawlessness of the Obama administration, which has risked the life of the Bolivian president and provoked a major diplomatic row in its bid to capture Snowden. His only “crime” has been to expose the criminal actions of the US in establishing a vast NSA spying operation on the American people and the population of the world.

There is literally no line that Washington will not cross. Last week Obama declared that he would “not scramble jets” to force a plane suspected of carrying Snowden to land. This week European authorities have in effect done just that. If the Bolivian plane had entered Portuguese or French airspace, their air forces could have been used to compel it to land.

Washington’s actions underscore the Obama administration’s desperation to silence Snowden. His revelations so far have already exposed the vast extent of US spying. American intelligence agencies are no doubt well aware that Snowden has more information in his possession that will further compromise their criminal activities.

Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca has denied that Snowden was on board the president’s plane. “We don’t know who invented this lie. We want to denounce to the international community this injustice with the plane of President Evo Morales,” he told reporters.

Choquehuanca accused France and Portugal of putting “at risk the life of the president.” He dismissed the explanation of “technical reasons”, saying: “After getting explanations from some authorities we found that there appeared to be some unfounded suspicions that Mr Snowden was on the plane.”

Bolivia is one of a handful of countries that have

indicated their willingness to consider Snowden's appeal for asylum. In Moscow, President Morales told Russian broadcaster, RT Actualidad, that if there was a request "of course we would be willing to debate and consider the idea." He said that Snowden "deserves the world's protection."

The incident has already provoked an angry reaction in Bolivia and other Latin American countries. Protesters waving Bolivian flags gathered outside the French embassy in the Bolivian capital of La Paz calling for the embassy to be shut down. One protest leader told the media that the demonstration was to tell France and Portugal that "they have no right to deny the president of a country, such as Bolivia, to land."

The US has bullied a number of countries, including Ecuador, into either denying Snowden asylum outright, or indicating that his application would only be considered once he is within their national territory. Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared that Snowden could have asylum in Russia, but only on condition that he cease leaking information—which Snowden has refused to do.

In a statement on Monday on the WikiLeaks website, Snowden condemned the efforts of the Obama administration "to pressure the leaders of nations from which I have requested protection to deny my asylum petitions."

In a separate letter in Spanish to Ecuador's president Rafael Correa, Snowden wrote: "I remain free and able to publish information that serves the public interest. No matter how many more days my life contains, I remain dedicated to the fight for justice in this unequal world."



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