Snowden Hits Hurdles in Search for Asylum

NATALIYA VASILYEVA, Associated Press

Moscow (AP) — NSA leaker Edward Snowden's best chance of finding refuge outside the United States may hinge on the president of Venezuela, who was in Moscow on Tuesday meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela told Russian reporters on Tuesday that his country has not received an application for asylum from Snowden and dodged the question of whether he would take Snowden away with him. But Maduro also defended the former National Security Agency contractor who released sensitive documents on U.S. intelligence-gathering operations.

"He did not kill anyone and did not plant a bomb," Maduro said ahead of his meeting with Putin, the Interfax news agency reported. "What he did was tell a great truth in an effort to prevent wars. He deserves protection under international and humanitarian law."

During his Kremlin meeting with Putin, Maduro spoke about plans to build on the strong ties with Russia formed under his late predecessor, Hugo Chavez. Neither he nor Putin mentioned Snowden in their public statements.

The Kremlin-friendly newspaper Izvestia reported Monday that the two presidents would discuss Snowden, adding to speculation that arrangements would be made for Snowden to travel to Venezuela. Snowden had initially booked flights to Havana, Cuba, and then on to Caracas, Venezuela, before becoming trapped in legal limbo in a Moscow airport more than a week ago.

Snowden withdrew his bid for asylum in Russia when he learned the terms Moscow had set out, according to Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov. Putin said on Monday that Russia was ready to shelter Snowden as long as he stopped leaking U.S. secrets.

At the same time, Putin said he had no plans to turn over Snowden to the United States.

Snowden also has applied for asylum in 20 other countries, according to WikiLeaks, a secret spilling website, but many of those countries said he cannot apply from abroad. Officials in Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain and Switzerland all said he must make his request on their soil.

WikiLeaks said requests have also been made to Bolivia, Brazil, China, Cuba, Ecuador, France, Iceland, India, Italy, Ireland, Netherlands, Nicaragua, Spain and Venezuela.

India's External Affairs Ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin said Delhi has carefully examined the asylum request and decided to turn it down.

WikiLeaks also posted a statement attributed to Snowden on its website late Monday, in which he slams President Barack Obama for "using citizenship as a weapon."

"Although I am convicted of nothing, (the United States) has unilaterally revoked my passport, leaving me a stateless person," Snowden says in the statement. "Without any judicial order, the administration now seeks to stop me exercising a basic right. A right that belongs to everybody. The right to seek asylum.

"Their purpose is to frighten, not me, but those who would come after me."

Snowden, who has been on the run since releasing the sensitive NSA documents, is believed to have been in the transit zone of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport since his arrival from Hong Kong on June 23.

WikiLeaks legal adviser Sarah Harrison delivered the request for asylum to an official at the Russian consulate at the Moscow airport on Sunday, according to the group that has adopted Snowden and his cause.

Ecuador, where he had initially hoped to get asylum, has been giving mixed signals about offering him shelter.

Britain's Press Association news agency said it had obtained a letter from Snowden to Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa thanking him for considering his asylum request.

"There are few world leaders who would risk standing for the human rights of an individual against the most powerful government on earth, and the bravery of Ecuador and its people is an example to the world," PA quoted the letter as saying. The agency said it had obtained the Spanish-language letter from sources in Quito, the capital of Ecuador.

Correa, however, appeared cool to Snowden in an interview with the Guardian newspaper.

Asked whether he would like to meet Snowden, Correa was quoted as saying: "Not particularly. He's a very complicated person. Strictly speaking, Mr. Snowden spied for some time."

He was quoted as saying that Ecuador would not consider an asylum request until Snowden was on its territory and his government would not help him travel to Ecuador.

The expanded requests for asylum come as the Obama administration contends with European allies angry about the release of documents that alleged U.S. eavesdropping on European Union diplomats.

Obama said Monday that the U.S. would provide allies with information about new reports that the NSA had bugged EU offices in Washington, New York and Brussels. But he also suggested such activity by governments would hardly be unusual.

French President Francois Hollande said Tuesday that France has "not received any particular requests from Mr. Snowden." He also called for a common EU stance on the NSA snooping.

France prides itself on being a haven for political prisoners, and offers asylum to more people annually than any other country but the United States. French politicians on the far right and far left have called for France to take Snowden in — as have members of the Green party, which is a part of Hollande's Socialist-led government. However, it is unlikely that France would take in Snowden. Hollande and leading French officials, despite outraged comments in recent days, sees the US as a key ally.

A foreign ministry spokeswoman in Beijing said it was not aware of Snowden's possible plea to seek asylum in China.

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Associated Press writers Lynn Berry in Moscow, Frank Jordans in Berlin, George Jahn in Vienna, Matti Huutanen in Helsinki, Finland, Monika Scislowska in Warsaw, Poland, Angela Charlton in Paris, Ciaran Giles in Madrid, Spain, and AP researchers Zhao Liang and Yu Bing in Beijing contributed to this report.

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