

Snowden's odyssey: Will Latin America dare the US? (Comment - Special to IANS)

IANS *By Deepak Bhojwani / IANS India Private Limited*

On July 11, the normally sedate airport in Havana, the Cuban capital, was invaded by dozens of foreign journalists. Word had spread that Edward Snowden was aboard Aeroflot flight 150 from Moscow, which landed at 18.38 hours local time. A Chilean journalist with a sense of humour even carried a placard with Snowden's name. The reaction of the journalists, some of whom had flown down to Havana for this purpose, revealed the incandescent nature of this case that made international headlines.

Snowden has become a cause célèbre in Latin America since his sudden appearance, weeks ago, at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport from Hong Kong. From the transit area of the airport, he is understood to have approached at least 21 countries, through his lawyer, seeking asylum. The Latin American countries include Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

The Cuban government has made no comment on Snowden's reported request to that country for asylum. Analysts believe it does not want to prejudice ongoing talks with the United States and to have to harbour a 'toxic' fugitive indefinitely. President Raúl Castro has, however, backed Venezuela's right to offer him asylum.

Ecuador, to which Snowden first applied for asylum, in the footsteps of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange a year earlier, claims he needs to request asylum on Ecuadorian territory - even an embassy - in order for the government to consider it. Snowden has been assisted and advised behind the scenes by Assange, who continues to avail asylum in Ecuador's embassy in London.

He was publicly upbraided by Ecuador's President Rafael Correa for pretending to speak for Ecuador on this issue. Ecuador's government also maintained the safe conduct pass issued to Snowden by a functionary of the embassy in London was unauthorised and invalid. President Correa nevertheless reacted against a move by some US Congressmen lobbying to cancel tariff preferences covering around \$23 million of Ecuador's exports to the US. On June 27, he "unilaterally and irrevocably" renounced the benefits of this scheme. In a throwback to the bad old days, the Ecuador communication secretary, who made the announcement, offered the US \$23 million to train its officials in human rights.

Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua have offered Snowden asylum. President Nicolas Maduro made the announcement on July 5, Venezuela's national day. Bolivian President Evo Morales has greater casus belli. His return flight from Moscow, where he attended a conference of gas producing countries, force-landed in Austria on July 2 after France, Spain, Italy and Portugal

denied it overflight rights. Morales spent 13 hours at Vienna airport as Austrian officials searched the presidential plane. Spain allowed a refueling halt in the Canary Islands after demanding a note from Bolivia that Snowden was not on board the plane.

The diplomatic insult was condemned by all regional leaders, some of whom recalled their ambassadors to the four European countries, while Morales threatened to shut down the US embassy in La Paz. The Washington-based Organisation of American States (OAS) followed suit after an emergency meeting at which only the US and Canada expressed reservations. Latin American media quoted extensively from Snowden's July 1 statement where he said: "In the end the Obama administration is not afraid of whistleblowers like me, Bradley Manning or Thomas Drake. We are stateless, imprisoned, or powerless. No, the Obama administration is afraid of you. It is afraid of an informed, angry public demanding the constitutional government it was promised - and it should be."

To add fuel to the fire, Brazil's leading media house, O Globo, in conjunction with The Guardian's Glenn Greenwald, who broke the original Snowden story, revealed on July 9 that the US National Security Agency had used the programs impugned by Snowden to spy on Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Brazil has commenced a detailed investigation of its companies that may have permitted the US National Security Agency and its contractors to access data out of Brazil. It has asked the US for an official explanation.

The Snowden affair has brought into sharp focus the political faultlines in Latin America. The countries committed to left-wing solidarity - Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Cuba and Nicaragua - have had no hesitation in condemning the US.

The Declaration of the Mercosur Summit in Uruguay on July 13 "emphatically denounced the interception of telecommunications and acts of espionage in our countries". Argentina's Foreign Minister Hector Timmerman called for an investigation by Argentina into documents revealing that several high Argentine officials, including its vice president, had been spied upon. The Brazilian establishment has taken a strong political stand, knowing it has the US on the backfoot, but has been careful not to cancel, as yet, President Dilma Rousseff's planned official visit to the US in October. The reaction from close US allies, Mexico and Colombia, has been more subdued.

Meanwhile, Snowden, at his press conference of July 12, accepted Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer of conditional asylum. This could enable him to exit the transit area of the airport and eventually seek asylum formally in any of the Latin American countries that welcome him. Whatever the denouement, it is clear that the United States - and possibly some of its close allies - have some explaining to do to the Latin Americans. If Snowden's odyssey ends in a Latin American haven, the political ramifications will reverberate for some time to come.

(24-07-2013-Deepak Bhojwani has served from 2000 till 2013 as Ambassador of India in seven Latin American countries and was Consul General of India in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The views expressed are personal. He can be contacted at bhojwani@latindiaconsult.com)