

Snowden Affair Raises Doubts About Obama Moscow Visit

July 08, 2013



Presidents Obama and Putin at last months G8 summit. **Kevin Lamarque**

The Kremlin has “received no information” about whether U.S. President Barack Obama may cancel his planned September visit to Moscow over the presence of fugitive Edward Snowden in Russia, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said Monday.

Speaking to radio Ekho Moskv, Dmitry Peskov made the comment in response to a question about a news report that said Obama could call off the trip if Snowden, believed to be in the transit area of Sheremetyevo Airport, was still in Russia come fall.

Kommersant on Monday cited an unidentified person “close to the U.S. State Department” as saying it was unlikely Obama would come for an official visit if Snowden remained at Sheremetyevo. The former U.S. National Security Agency systems analyst is wanted by the U.S. on espionage charges stemming from his leaking of secret documents related to American spy efforts.

The Kommersant source said Washington's position on the subject had been communicated

to the Kremlin, but Peskov seemed to deny this.

U.S.-Russia ties have become strained in the 14 months since Putin retook the Kremlin last May, and Snowden's extended layover in Moscow has become an additional point of contention, although both sides have played down its significance publicly.

Obama has been planning to attend the Group of 20 summit in September in St. Petersburg with a separate official visit with Putin in Moscow planned for the same time.

U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul said Monday that he was actively preparing for the trip.

"Busy with preparations for the arrival of Obama to Moscow and St. Petersburg in September. Anxiously awaiting this visit," McFaul tweeted in Russian.

On Sunday, prominent State Duma Deputy Alexei Pushkov encouraged Snowden to accept an offer of asylum from Venezuela, in line with the Kremlin's position that the U.S. fugitive needs to move on as soon as possible.

"Venezuela is waiting for an answer from Snowden," Pushkov tweeted. "This, perhaps, is his last chance to receive political asylum."

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elias Jaua said Saturday that his country had not yet been in contact with Snowden, who Russian officials say has been in the transit area of Sheremetyevo since arriving on a flight from Hong Kong two weeks ago. He has been unable to travel further because the U.S. annulled his passport.

Jaua said he expected to consult with Russian officials on Monday about Snowden's situation.

For Snowden to leave for South America, he would need for Venezuela to issue him travel documents and he would need to find a way to get there. The only direct commercial flight from Moscow goes to Havana, Cuba, and Snowden had booked a seat on this flight the day after arriving from Hong Kong, but failed to show up.

The Moscow-Havana flight goes over Europe and the U.S., which could cause complications. Some European countries refused to allow Bolivian President Evo Morales to fly through their airspace on his way home from Moscow last week because of suspicions that Snowden was onboard his plane.

Pushkov joked that if Snowden did not find shelter in Venezuela, "he will have to stay and marry Anna Chapman," the redheaded Russian spy who was among 10 sleeper agents deported from the U.S. in 2010. The 31-year-old Chapman proposed to Snowden, who just turned 30, on Twitter last week.

The presidents of Bolivia and Nicaragua also said over the weekend that Snowden was welcome in their countries. Bolivia's foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, said Sunday on state television that his country had not yet received a formal petition for asylum from Snowden. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said his country's embassy in Moscow had received Snowden's application and was studying the request.

Snowden has applied for asylum in more than two dozen countries, including Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, according to WikiLeaks, the secret-spilling website that has been advising him.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/07/08/snowden-affair-raises-doubts-about-obama-moscow-visit-a25610>