

Ecuador ready to negotiate on Assange conditional to UK withdrawing Threat to Raid Embassy

by Eduardo Garcia via *juan Tuesday, Aug 21 2012, 10:47pm*

international / prose / post

QUITO, Aug 21 (Reuters) - Ecuador is ready to negotiate over the fate of Julian Assange if Britain withdraws a threat to raid its embassy in London where the WikiLeaks founder has sought refuge, President Rafael Correa said on Tuesday.

Ecuador was incensed by a veiled British threat to enter the embassy to arrest the 41-year-old former computer hacker, who is trying to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he is wanted for questioning over allegations of rape and sexual assault.

Correa has offered Assange asylum and told Britain to let him leave the embassy and fly to the South American country. The leftist leader said Assange, who has been in the building for nine weeks, was welcome to stay there "indefinitely," but also said he was open to discussions.

"Despite that rude, impertinent and unacceptable remark we're still open to dialogue," Correa told reporters in the coastal city of Guayaquil.

"We don't expect an apology, but of course we expect Britain to retract the extremely serious mistake they made when they issued the threat that they could violate our diplomatic mission to arrest Mr. Julian Assange."

Foreign ministers from across Latin America broadly backed Quito's position as the government rallied regional support at a series of high-level meetings in Ecuador over the weekend.

Correa says he shared Assange's fears that from Sweden he could be further extradited to the United States and face charges there. His WikiLeaks website published a barrage of secret army documents and diplomatic cables in 2010 that exposed Washington's power-broking around the world.

Correa has portrayed the saga as a struggle between a small country and "imperialist" powers, the United States and Britain.

Local analysts say that playing up the "colonial" angle helps burnish Correa's anti-U.S. credentials and could lift his ratings. It also plays well with his ally Venezuela's socialist President Hugo Chavez, the biggest critic of Washington in the region.

Correa, a 49-year-old economist, has become popular with many Ecuadoreans by building hospitals and schools, and for programs of cash handouts for the poor. He is well placed to win re-election next year if -- as widely expected -- he runs.

MICROWAVE AND A TREADMILL

Ecuador has said it might take the dispute over Assange to the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

But it wants to convince London that it should let the Australian citizen travel to Ecuador, or give him written guarantees that he would not be extradited to the United States. Correa's government says there have been no talks since Aug. 15.

Assange, whose platinum hair and friendships with the rich and famous have helped make him a global celebrity, spoke from the balcony of the embassy on Sunday. He denounced what he called a U.S. "witch hunt" targeting him, but did not mention the accusations made against him by two women.

That omission infuriated many in Sweden, who say the sex crime allegations by two WikiLeaks supporters in 2010 have played second fiddle to unwarranted theories of a U.S.-led conspiracy to extradite Assange with the help of allies in Europe.

Correa said Ecuador never intended to stop Assange from facing justice in Sweden. "What we've asked for is guarantees that he won't be extradited to a third country," he said.

The Ecuadorean leader also said his nation had to improvise to provide Assange with as many home comforts as possible at the diplomatic mission in London's affluent Knightsbridge area, including a bed, microwave, shower and treadmill for jogging.

"Since Mr. Assange has received asylum from the Ecuadorean state, he can stay in the embassy indefinitely," Correa said.

Since taking office in 2007, Correa has often sparred with journalists whom he accuses of trying to undermine his rule. Critics in the media accuse him of muzzling them and behaving like an autocrat.

Earlier this year he won a libel case against three newspaper publishers and a columnist for an article that called him a dictator and alleged he had ordered troops to fire on civilians during a protest. He later pardoned them.

"I wonder what would England do if a journalist, with the permission and complicity of a newspaper, accused the Queen of a genocide?," Correa said when asked about accusations that he has used the courts to silence media critics.

He added that in his domestic disputes with journalists he had only ever been standing up to unscrupulous media bosses.

"We face up to (the likes of) Murdoch in the United Kingdom, who thought that they were above the law until a government came along to implement the law for all," Correa said, referring to the Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Murdoch's British newspaper arm is under investigation for illegally tapping the voicemails of celebrities, sports stars and politicians. There have been more than 60 arrests, including dozens of current and former journalists.

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Assange's theater of the absurd

by Linda S. Heard

The life of the world's best known whistleblower Julian Assange is playing out like a movie script too

fantastical even for Hollywood. Who could have imagined that an Australian, who, as yet, hasn't been charged with any crime, would be holed-up in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London's Knightsbridge attempting to escape the clutches of Sweden and the U.S.!

On Sunday, British police swarmed around the tiny embassy premises while a police helicopter circled the skies above to prevent this heinous fugitive from the law from escaping in a diplomatic crate or in disguise or wafting off from the roof in a hot air balloon. Hundreds of his supporters and the odd bemused shopper carrying Harrods bags waited for his publicized appearance, discussing how he could walk free. Social media and newspaper talk boards were abuzz with ideas, most off the wall. There does seem to be a consensus, however, that one may be workable. Ecuador could make Assange as its envoy to the United Nations, an appointment that would not require British Foreign Office approval.

The media was out in force, their cameras trained on a ground floor balcony adorned with the Ecuadorian flag. Each time the curtain twitched, cheers roared out. At times, the Ecuadorian Ambassador Ms. Ana Alban Mora could be glimpsed smiling shyly as she peeped outside. Even the guys fiddling with the microphone looked excited and why wouldn't they be when the mission has never before received so much attention. Then 'the great man' stepped out for his moment of glory, looking controlled and resolute.

His ten minute speech was masterful; that's my assessment although not everyone agrees. The Guardian called it "a PR triumph", the Sun characterized it as "a pompous rant." He thanked his supporters. He apologized to his children, promising to be with them soon. He applauded the Ecuadorean president for his courage in granting his request for asylum. He railed against the persecution of whistleblowers and journalists everywhere. He criticized the UK for its written threat to breach the Vienna conventions by stripping the embassy of its diplomatic status under an obscure domestic law that would enable Assange to be forcibly grabbed.

But his main message was targeted at President Barack Obama. "The United States must pledge before the world that it will not pursue journalists for shining a light on the secret crimes of the powerful," he said. Was that a halo I could see forming atop his head or a trick of the light? Suddenly the stony-faced men in dark blue a few feet away and those packing the fire escapes were made to look like oppressors or worse still, impotent Keystone Cops being tantalized by a villain whose feet they could almost reach up and grasp. Earlier, a former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray had warned them not to violate Ecuador's sovereignty. That would be a breach of international law, he said, and any bobby who did so would be liable for extradition to Ecuador as soon as he left Britain's shores.

Murray is one of Assange's staunchest supporters. He believes, as do many others, that Assange is being stitched-up by U.S. allies Britain and Sweden with trumped-up accusations on the instruction of Washington whose Justice Department is investigating whether or not to charge the Australian national for 'espionage' that carries the death penalty or life imprisonment. Assange's lawyers say they have proof that a secret American grand jury has already been formed. Clearly, Australia sees that scenario as being credible; its Washington embassy is getting ready "for the possibility of an extradition to the U.S."

Murray was once in Assange's position following his disclosure that the CIA was using proxies to torture suspects. Shortly afterward, he was accused by his employer the Foreign Office of expediting visas for sexual favors and was sacked. His reputation destroyed, he successfully struggled to clear his name. Prior to Assange's speech, he spoke of his plight shared with former U.S. Brig.-Gen. Janis Karpinski who was demoted for shoplifting — an offense for which she was never charged — after

she showed her distaste for the abhorrent way prisoners in Iraq's Abu Ghraib were being tortured, humiliated and killed.

The list of government whistleblowers that have been punished for speaking out is long. Notable is former Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson who dared to contradict the Bush administration's claim that Saddam Hussein was attempting to purchase yellow cake from Niger in an op-ed. Within no time his wife Valerie was 'outed' as a CIA agent.

A documentary titled "Top Priority, the Terror Within," which premiered earlier this year, highlights the predicament of former US Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Protection Officer Julia Davis. She was falsely accused of being a domestic terrorist for exposing shortcomings in the processing of applicants wanting entry into the U.S. For that, her home was raided by commandos using Blackhawk helicopters; they broke down doors and assaulted her parents. Her friends and family were subjected to warrantless surveillance, searches and seizures. Some 54 investigations were opened in her name.

It's no wonder that Assange will go to just about any lengths to avoid ending up in a U.S. jail when the U.S. soldier Bradley Manning, alleged to have passed diplomatic cables and war logs, to WikiLeaks, has been in military detention without trial for two years in conditions, described by Juan E. Mendez, a UN Special Rapporteur, as "cruel, inhuman and degrading."

Assange is perfectly willing to travel to Sweden for questioning on condition he receives assurances that he will not be extradited to the US, which both the US and Swedish authorities have refused to provide. Moreover, numerous invitations for Swedish prosecutors to conduct interviews with Assange in London have been turned down without reasons given; odd when earlier this year a Swedish prosecutor traveled to Serbia to interrogate an alleged murderer. The UK's Home Secretary is also empowered to step in to make Assange's extradition to Sweden conditional upon Stockholm's pledge not to re-extradite him to a third country, which she hasn't sought to do.

If something is rotten in the State of Denmark, to use a quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet, it seems to me that the fishy stench from a red herring born across the Atlantic might have permeated to Sweden and the UK too. The Ecuadorian Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino seems to think so. He says he finds the charges "hilarious" saying Assange "is charged because his condom broke."

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<http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/22/wikileaks-assange-ecuador-idINL2E8JL8IF20120822>

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