Intelligence official: No plans to end broad surveillance program (Update)

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Glenn Greenwald, a reporter of Britain's The Guardian newspaper, speaks to The Associated Press in Hong Kong Tuesday, June 11, 2013. Greenwald, the journalist who interviewed Edward Snowden, a 29-year-old contractor who allowed himself to be revealed as the source of disclosures about the U.S. government's secret surveillance programs, said he had been in touch with Snowden, but declined to say whether he was still in Hong Kong and said he didn't know what his future plans were. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

President Barack Obama's administration is considering whether to

charge a government contractor with leaking classified surveillance secrets while it defends the broad U.S. spy program that it says keeps America safe from terrorists.

Facing a global uproar over the programs that track phone and Internet messages around the world, the Justice Department continued to investigate whether the disclosures of Edward Snowden, 29, an employee of government contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, were criminal.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament planned to debate the spy programs Tuesday and whether they have violated local privacy protections. EU officials in Brussels pledged to seek answers from U.S. diplomats at a trans-Atlantic ministerial meeting in Dublin later this week.

The global scrutiny comes after revelations from Snowden, who has chosen to reveal his identity. Snowden has fled to Hong Kong in hopes of escaping criminal charges as lawmakers including Senate intelligence chairwoman Sen. Dianne Feinstein accuse him of committing an "act of treason" that should be prosecuted.

Officials in Germany and the European Union issued calm but firm complaints Monday over two National Security Agency programs that target suspicious foreign messages—potentially including phone numbers, email, images, video and other online communications transmitted through U.S. providers. British Foreign Secretary William Hague tried to assure Parliament that the spy programs do not encroach on U.K. privacy laws.

And in Washington, members of Congress said they would take a new look at potential ways to keep the U.S. safe from terror attacks without giving up privacy protections.

"There's very little trust in the government, and that's for good reason," said Rep. Adam Schiff, a Democrat who sits on the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee. "We're our own worst enemy."

Republican House Speaker John Boehner, however, said he believes President Barack Obama has fully explained why the program is needed. He told ABC's "Good Morning America" Tuesday that "the disclosure of this information puts Americans at risk. It shows our adversaries what our capabilities are and it's a giant violation of the law." He called Snowden a "traitor."

A senior U.S. intelligence official on Monday said there were no plans to scrap the programs that, despite the backlash, continue to receive widespread if cautious support within Congress. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive security issue.

The programs were revealed last week by The Guardian and The Washington Post newspapers. National Intelligence Director James Clapper has taken the unusual step of declassifying some of the previously top-secret details to help the administration mount a public defense of the surveillance as a necessary step to protect Americans.

Clapper came under fire from one of the staunchest critics of government surveillance programs, Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat. He said Clapper did not give him a straight answer last March when he asked whether the National Security Agency collects any data on millions of Americans.

Wyden, a member of the Senate intelligence committee, called for hearings to discuss the surveillance programs. He was also among a group of senators who introduced legislation Tuesday to force the government to declassify opinions of a secret court that authorizes the surveillance.

"The American people have the right to expect straight answers from the intelligence leadership to the questions asked by their representatives," Wyden said in a statement.

He was referring to an exchange with Clapper during a committee meeting in March when Clapper denied the NSA collected any type of data on millions of Americans, then softened his answer by adding "not wittingly." Wyden said he gave Clapper the chance to amend his answer but he did not. .

One of the NSA programs gathers hundreds of millions of U.S. phone records to search for possible links to known terrorist targets abroad. The other allows the government to tap into nine U.S. Internet companies and gather all communications to detect suspicious behavior that begins overseas.

Snowden is a former CIA employee who later worked as a contractor for the NSA on behalf of Booz Allen, where he gained access to the surveillance.

The first explosive document Snowden revealed was a top secret court order issued by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court that granted a three-month renewal for a massive collection of American phone records. That order was signed April 25.

In a statement issued Sunday, Booz Allen said Snowden had been an employee for fewer than three months, so it's possible he was working as an NSA contractor when the order was issued.

Snowden also gave the Post and the Guardian a PowerPoint presentation on another secret program that collects online usage by the nine Internet providers. The U.S. government says it uses that information only to track foreigners' use overseas.

Believing his role would soon be exposed, Snowden fled last month to Hong Kong.

"All of the options, as he put it, are bad options," Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald, who first reported the phone-tracking program and interviewed Snowden extensively, told The Associated Press on Monday. He said Snowden decided to release details of the programs out of shock and anger over the sheer scope of the government's privacy invasions.

"It was his choice to publicly unveil himself," Greenwald told the AP in Hong Kong. "He recognized that even if he hadn't publicly unveiled himself, it was only a matter of time before the U.S. government discovered that it was he who had been responsible for these disclosures, and he made peace with that. ... He's very steadfast and resolute about the fact that he did the right thing."

Although Hong Kong has an extradition treaty with the U.S., the document has some exceptions, including for crimes deemed political. Any negotiations about his possible handover will involve Beijing, but some analysts believe China is unlikely to want to jeopardize its relationship with Washington over someone it would consider of little political interest.

The Justice Department is investigating whether his disclosures were a criminal offense—a matter that's not always clear-cut under U.S. federal law.

The Obama administration also now must deal with the political and diplomatic fallout of the disclosures. Privacy laws across much of Western Europe are stricter than they are in the United States.

"It would be unacceptable and would need swift action from the EU if indeed the U.S. National Security Agency were processing European

data without permission," said Guy Verhofstadt, a Belgian member of the European parliament.

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