

Ecuador grants asylum to WikiLeaks' Assange

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British police officers move a protester in support of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from the front of Ecuadorian Embassy in central London, London, Thursday, Aug. 16, 2012. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange entered the embassy in June in an attempt to gain political asylum to prevent him from being extradited to Sweden, where he faces allegations of sex crimes, which he denies. (AP Photo/Sang Tan)

(AP) — He's won asylum in Ecuador, but Julian Assange is no closer to getting there.

The decision by the South American nation to identify the WikiLeaks founder as a refugee is a symbolic boost for the embattled ex-hacker. But legal experts say that does little to help him avoid extradition to Sweden on sexual assault allegations.

Instead, with British officials asserting they won't grant Assange safe passage out of the country, the case has done much to drag the two nations into an international faceoff.

"We're at something of an impasse," lawyer Rebecca Niblock said. "It's not a question of law anymore. It's a question of politics and diplomacy."

The silver-haired Australian shot to international prominence in 2010 after he began publishing a huge trove of American diplomatic and military secrets — including a quarter million U.S. Embassy cables that shed a harsh light on the backroom dealings of U.S. diplomats. Amid the ferment, two Swedish women accused him of sexual assault; Assange has been fighting extradition to Sweden ever since.

Interpol, the Lyon, France-based international police agency, issued a statement late Thursday saying Assange remains on the equivalent of its most-wanted list, the Ecuadorian decision notwithstanding.

The convoluted saga took its latest twist on Thursday, when Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino announced that he had granted asylum to Assange, who has been holed up inside the small, coastal nation's embassy since June 19. He said Ecuador was taking action because Assange faces a serious threat of unjust prosecution at the hands of U.S. officials.

That was a nod to the fears expressed by Assange and others that the Swedish sex case is merely the opening gambit in a Washington-orchestrated plot to make him stand trial in the United States — something disputed by both Swedish authorities and the women involved.

In a message posted to its Twitter account, WikiLeaks said Assange would make a public statement outside Ecuador's embassy on Sunday

afternoon — potentially offering British police the chance to arrest him. The secret-spilling website did not immediately respond to attempts to contact it to provide additional details.

Patino said he tried to secure guarantees from the Americans, the British and the Swedes that Assange would not be extradited to the United States, but was rebuffed by all three. If Assange were extradited to the U.S. "he would not have a fair trial, could be judged by special or military courts, and it's not implausible that cruel and degrading treatment could be applied, that he could be condemned to life in prison, or the death penalty," Patino said.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said she did not accept Assange's claim, or Ecuador's acceptance of it, that he could potentially face persecution in the United States. "With regard to the charge that the U.S. was intent on persecuting him, I reject that completely," she said Thursday.

Under Ecuador's asylum offer, Assange is not permitted to make political statements or grant interviews of a political nature, restrictions that are standard for anyone granted asylum, said an Ecuadorean Foreign Ministry official, who was not authorized to be quoted by name.

Significantly, Ecuador did not grant political but rather diplomatic asylum to Assange.

"Political asylum would imply that Great Britain is persecuting him or threatens to persecute him," said Robert Sloane, international law professor at Boston University. By granting diplomatic asylum, Ecuador is keeping the door open to political negotiations. Sloane said that the type of asylum does not confer any diplomatic status or special privileges on Assange.

Ecuador's decision was warmly received by the 41-year-old Assange, who watched the foreign minister announce it from Quito in a live televised news conference. In a statement he praised Ecuador's "courage."



British police officers arrest a protesters in support of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from the front of Ecuadorian Embassy in central London, London, Thursday, Aug. 16, 2012. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange entered the embassy in June in an attempt to gain political asylum to prevent him from being extradited to Sweden, where he faces allegations of sex crimes, which he denies. (AP Photo/Sang Tan)

Pro-Assange demonstrators gathered outside the Edwardian-era embassy building, and broke into cheers when the news filtered out onto the street.

"It must have been a tough decision for Ecuador because they had pressure," said Alejandra Cazas, an 18-year-old British-Bolivian citizen. "Now they have to watch out that he arrives to Ecuador safely."

But British Foreign Secretary William Hague said Britain will not allow Assange safe passage to Latin America. "There is no legal basis for us to

do so," he said.

He said Assange was wanted in Sweden to answer allegations of "serious sexual offenses" and that the extradition had nothing to do with the work of WikiLeaks or with the United States.

Hague also insisted that Britain did not recognize the concept of diplomatic asylum, which he said was not a universal means of granting refuge.

Britain's response to Ecuador's offer prompted Peru, the acting chair of the Union of South American Nations, to call an extraordinary meeting for Sunday at Ecuador's request in Guayaquil, Ecuador, to discuss the Assange standoff.

Supporters who have visited Assange say he is living inside a tiny office at Ecuador's embassy, a small apartment of five or six rooms inside a larger building which also houses Colombia's embassy.

Assange has a bed, access to a phone and a connection to the Internet. "It's not quite the Hilton," said Gavin MacFadyen, a supporter who has met with Assange at the embassy.

The diplomatic repercussions continued Thursday with an unlikely confrontation between Sweden and Ecuador.

In a mark of its anger over the asylum ruling, the Swedish Foreign Ministry said it had summoned Ecuador's ambassador to complain about the decision. The country's foreign minister, Carl Bildt, said in a message posted on Twitter that "our firm legal and constitutional system guarantees the rights of each and every one. We firmly reject any accusations to the contrary."

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa did not seem to be in any mood for compromise either, posting a tweet that read: "No one is going to frighten us."

In Washington, Ecuador asked the Organization of American States to hold a meeting Aug. 23 to discuss the Assange situation. Several nations on the OAS's Permanent Council supported the idea, while the U.S. and Canada opposed it. The council put off a decision until Friday so delegates could consult with their home governments.

The issue already seems to have frayed diplomatic ties between the U.K. and Ecuador. Britain's previous ambassador to Ecuador, Linda Cross, departed earlier this year and had been due to be replaced this month by Patrick Mullee. But his arrival has been delayed.

Ties could fray further if Britain decides to enforce a little-known 1987 law that gives the U.K. the right to enter the embassy to arrest Assange — but most legal experts called such a development unlikely and potentially dangerous.

If Britain carried out such a move, as it suggested it might in a note delivered to Ecuador on Wednesday, "it would threaten their embassy premises around the world," as it could leave them open to reprisals, said Niblock, who practices at London law firm Kingsley Napley.

Many Britons have memories of a dramatic scene in 1980 when British special forces soldiers burst into the Iranian Embassy — at Iran's request — to free hostages captured by gunmen who had broken into the building six days earlier.

Hague insisted Britain had no plan to force entry into Ecuador's mission. "There is no threat here to storm an embassy," he told reporters.

Meanwhile, legal experts and diplomatic historians were abuzz with various unlikely scenarios for Assange's escape from Britain — perhaps hidden in a diplomatic car or smuggled in an oversized diplomatic bag.

Some have speculated Britain could revoke the diplomatic status of Ecuador's embassy — a move which would effectively sever friendly links between the two nations, but allow police to walk inside and arrest Assange.

Britain's foreign ministry said diplomats would continue discussions with Ecuador aimed at resolving the case, but Hague warned that he expected the diplomatic stalemate to continue.

"This could go on for quite a considerable time as things stand," he told reporters. "There is no time limit for resolving this."

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