

UK govt ordered official to stem Guardian leaks

August 21 2013, by Danica Kirka



A display fronts the offices of the Guardian and its sister paper, The Observer, on Monday night, Aug. 19, 2013. The Guardian's editor, Alan Rusbridger, said Monday that British agents oversaw the destruction of an unspecified number of his newspaper's hard drives in an apparent bid to keep the fruit of Edward Snowden's leaks safe from Chinese spies. (AP Photo/Raphael Satter)

Britain's government ordered the country's top civil servant to ask the

Guardian newspaper to destroy data leaked by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, senior ministers said Wednesday.

The Guardian says it came under pressure from the government soon after it started publishing stories in June about U.S. and British surveillance based on Snowden's information.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg defended the decision to ask Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood to approach the newspaper.

"The deputy [prime minister](#) thought it was reasonable for the cabinet secretary to request that the Guardian destroyed data that would represent a serious threat to [national security](#) if it was to fall into the wrong hands," Clegg's office said in a statement. "The deputy prime minister felt this was a preferable approach to taking legal action."

The statement said the action "was agreed to on the understanding that the purpose of the destruction of the material would not impinge on the Guardian's ability to publish articles about the issue, but would help as a precautionary measure to protect lives and security."

The Guardian says it destroyed hard drives containing material leaked by Snowden rather than hand it over or face legal action from the government.

The paper says it has other copies of the material outside Britain.

Foreign Secretary William Hague also backed the decision to ask the Guardian to get rid of the documents.

"The government clearly has a duty if information is held insecurely and could be damaging to our national security, to try to make sure that it is recovered or destroyed," he said.

Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger disclosed the destruction amid disquiet over the detention of Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald's partner, David Miranda, who was held for nearly nine hours at London's Heathrow Airport. Miranda was ferrying data between filmmaker Laura Poitras in Germany to Greenwald, who is based in Brazil.

Civil libertarians says Miranda's detention was unlawful and an abuse of power.

A law firm representing Miranda has begun legal action against the government and wants assurances that material seized from him will not be shared with anyone.

Snowden leaked classified documents that exposed NSA programs that monitor Internet and phone data, touching off a debate about whether national security trumped privacy—the most sweeping reassessment of surveillance powers since the aftermath of the Sept, 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Snowden left the United States before the program was exposed and has won temporary asylum in Russia. Greenwald has pledged to continuing reporting, using information Snowden supplied.

The combination of the data destruction and the Miranda detention has touched off alarm in Britain about the reach of the secret state. The opposition Labour Party's Keith Vaz, chairman of Parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee, demanded that Prime Minister David Cameron make a "full statement" to Parliament on Sept. 2 when it returns from summer recess.

"The actions of the cabinet secretary are unprecedented and show that this issue has reached the highest levels of government," Vaz said.

"Although I am very surprised at this revelation, it explains why

Downing Street, the White House and the Home Secretary were briefed in advance about David Miranda's detention."

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