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Snowden Charged With ‘Espionage’ for Leaks to Press

By Jason Ditz

June 21, 2013

Whistleblower Edward Snowden’s battle for asylum can begin in earnest today, with the revelation that the US government has charged him with three crimes, including two charges of “espionage” for leaking information to the media. The complaint was filed on June 14 (pdf), but was “under seal.”



Snowden was the source of multiple revelations about the NSA's broad, abusive surveillance of ordinary Americans, and confirmed that shortly after the leaks broke, saying he wanted to inform the American public of what is going on.

Yet Snowden is in Hong Kong, and getting him from there could be an uphill battle. Defense lawyer Alan Dershowitz pointed out that the "espionage" charges, being explicitly political in nature, will make it much more difficult for Hong Kong to justify extraditing him to the United States, where if convicted he could face up to 30 years in prison – 10 years per charge.

Snowden expressed a preference to remain in Hong Kong, though the semi-autonomous city does have an extradition treaty with the United States, because of its history of support for freedom of speech. In some cases the Chinese government could overrule an extradition decision, but since Snowden uncovered broad surveillance abuse in Hong Kong itself, even local officials are likely to be very sympathetic and reluctant to turn him over.

Former CIA official Robert Baer, who immediately blamed China for the whole NSA revelation, said that Snowden's remaining in Hong Kong confirms that assessment, at least as far as he is concerned.

Yet there is no actual proof of this assumption, and Snowden has pointed out that it would've made no sense to go to Hong Kong if this was the case, calling it a "predictable smear."

A petition calling on President Obama to immediately and unconditionally pardon Edward Snowden is nearing its goal of 100,000 signatures. The petition would at the very least oblige President Obama to address the matter directly, whereas so far he has just made vague statements of welcoming the "conversation" about his surveillance of everyone, without taking a position on whether or not he is okay with us knowing about it in the first place. The charges against Snowden, of course, indicate that he is not.