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NSA casts massive surveillance net over Latin America

By Bill Van Auken

11 July 2013

Secret National Security Agency documents provided by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden have exposed a massive spying operation covering all of Latin America.

The NSA's interception of billions of telephone conversations, emails, Internet searches and other forms of communication made by Latin American individuals, companies and government agencies has provoked a wave of protests and demands for explanations by the Obama administration.

Snowden, the source of the secret documents, remained confined to the transit zone of Moscow's international airport Wednesday, with conflicting reports about the prospect of his finding asylum in Venezuela or elsewhere.

According to the documents reported in the Rio de Janeiro-based daily *O Globo*, the most intensive surveillance has been conducted against both US allies—including Brazil, Colombia and Mexico—and against Venezuela, whose bourgeois nationalist regime has in the past come into conflict with US aims in the region.

Also subjected to the NSA surveillance net have been Argentina, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Paraguay, Chile, Peru and El Salvador, according to the *O Globo* report.

The spying has involved two programs: PRISM, which collates email, Internet chats, searches and other material directly from the servers of IT companies such as Microsoft, Google, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Skype; and “Boundless Informant,” which collects telephone calls, faxes and other communications.

Also in use has been a program code-named Silverzephyr, which an NSA power-point slide explains is aimed at “accessing lines for information transmission through a partner,” referring to an unnamed private corporation with access to satellites, telephone networks and data transmission systems.

The revelation that telephone and Internet communications in numerous Latin American countries have been exposed to constant surveillance by the NSA has given the lie to US officials who have defended the agency’s wholesale spying on the populations of both the US itself and other countries as a necessary weapon in the so-called war on terror.

There is no evidence that the countries subjected to this spying were the source of terrorist threats against the US. Moreover, as the documents made public by Snowden make clear, much of the US surveillance has been directed at uncovering “commercial secrets,” arms purchases and other matters designed to further the interests of US-based banks and corporations in their struggle to dominate the region’s economies.

“One aspect that stands out in the documents is that...the United States doesn’t appear interested in military affairs alone, but also in trade secrets—‘oil’ in Venezuela, and ‘energy’ in Mexico, according to a list produced by the NSA in the first quarter of this year,” *O Globo* reported.

In its surveillance of Venezuelan communications, for example, the NSA has focused both on military procurements and the oil sector, while conducting intense spying operations following the death of President Hugo Chavez, who headed the country’s government for 14 years.

In Mexico, in addition to a focus on drug trafficking, the surveillance has been directed at securing information on energy policy and deals.

Significantly, among those protesting the spying operation was the Federation of Industries of the State of Sao Paulo, Brazil’s most powerful business lobby. Paulo Skaf, the president of the federation, said that “any espionage is condemnable and an abuse, whether it is against individuals or against companies, no matter what government commits it.” He added that the US government should be compelled to “make some kind of reparation.”

The NSA documents make clear that Colombia, which is Washington's closest ally in the region, receiving more military aid than any other countries save Israel and Egypt, has trailed only Brazil and Mexico as a target for US espionage. Even the right-wing government of President Juan Manuel Santos found itself compelled to issue a formal protest.

Mexico's government demanded that Washington provide "ample information" on its spying operation and affirmed that "relations between countries must be conducted with respect and observance of legal frameworks," while "energetically condemning any deviation from this practice."

Argentina's president, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, declared that she "felt a shiver going down my spine when we learned that they are spying on us all through their services in Brazil."

Certainly all of these bourgeois governments have carried out their own spying programs, several of them in collaboration with US intelligence.

Colombia's secret police agency, the Department of Administrative Services, was revealed to be involved in a wide-ranging wire-tapping operation two years ago, targeting members of parliament and Supreme Court justices.

Fernandez de Kirchner was compelled to dismiss a close political ally as minister of security following revelations that the agency was overseeing "Project X," in which the national police were spying on social activists and dissident trade unionists.

Until a recent decision by Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, CIA personnel worked directly alongside their Mexican counterparts in "intelligence fusion centers" set up inside Mexico.

And among the reports based on the leaked NSA documents published in *O Globo* was the revelation that so-called "Special Collection Service" centers were set up by the CIA and the NSA in Brasilia, Bogota, Caracas, Panama City and Mexico City to monitor information from foreign satellites.

Nonetheless, the exposure of the wholesale espionage by US intelligence has escalated tensions between the various Latin American governments and Washington, fueled in no small part by conflicting economic interests under conditions where the historic hegemony of US imperialism in the region has been eroded by increased trade and investment from China and Europe, as well as the growing role of Brazilian capital.

It is expected that the NSA spying operation as well as the recent incident in which the plane of Bolivian President Evo Morales was forced down in Europe over alleged suspicions that it was carrying Edward Snowden from Moscow to asylum in Bolivia will figure prominently in the

deliberations of a summit meeting of the Latin American trade bloc, Mercosur, which convenes in Montevideo Friday.

The Organization of American States, a body traditionally dominated by Washington, passed a resolution Tuesday condemning the act of state air piracy conducted by European governments at the behest of the CIA against Morales. Only the US and Canada failed to join in backing the statement, which demanded apologies from the governments of France, Spain, Italy and Portugal and explanations for their actions.

Spain, which initially refused such an apology, changed course Tuesday, with Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo declaring, "If any misunderstanding has taken place, I don't have any objection to saying sorry to President Morales."

Under questioning by reporters. Garcia-Margallo confirmed that the false information that Snowden had been aboard Morales's plane had come from the US.

The Bolivian government has charged that Washington knew its allegations to be false, but spread them as a means of retaliating against Morales for saying he was prepared to offer Snowden asylum and using the incident to intimidate him and anyone else contemplating aid to the ex-NSA contractor.

Despite relentless government and media vilification of Snowden, the latest opinion poll conducted by Quinnipiac University found a clear majority, 55 percent, identifying him as a "whistle-blower," i.e., someone who exposed government crimes, while barely one third agreed with the Obama administration in classifying him as a "traitor."

While it is far from clear whether the offers of asylum made by the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua will amount to more than left-nationalist rhetoric, it is clear that Snowden enjoys massive popular support both in the US and among working people all across the globe. It is only in the political mobilization of this support that his real defense lies.