

Ecuador in spotlight after Assange seeks Refuge in London Embassy

Wednesday, 20 June 2012

The Ecuadorean Embassy in London, a small redbrick building behind Harrods department store, became a center of international intrigue on Tuesday when the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange wandered in on a sunlit afternoon, trailing a web of legal and diplomatic complications.

He wanted, according to statements from the embassy and officials in Quito, "protective asylum" from the Swedish and American governments.

Last week, Britain's Supreme Court rejected Mr. Assange's final appeal in his 18-month legal battle against Sweden, which is seeking to extradite him for questioning about accusations of sexual abuse and rape made by two women in Stockholm in 2010. Barring intervention from the European Court of Human Rights, the British justices said, Mr. Assange would be sent to Sweden by midnight on July 7.

The United States, according to persistent reports, has impaneled a grand jury to investigate Mr. Assange over the release by WikiLeaks of hundreds of thousands of classified American military and diplomatic documents in 2010.

In a statement from the Ecuadorean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Integration, Mr. Assange said he had sought asylum because his native Australia had declined to protect him from what he hinted were unfair international attacks.

Sweden, he said, is "a place where the highest officials have attacked me openly." In the United States, he said, he is "being investigated for political crimes" that carry the death penalty. WikiLeaks representatives did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Ecuador's administration, which appears to have a warm relationship with Mr. Assange, said it would consider the application, and the embassy said he would remain "under the protection of the Ecuadorean government" in the meantime.

In a statement late Tuesday, the British Foreign Office said Mr. Assange was now "on diplomatic territory and beyond the reach of the police." It would not comment on whether that meant he had effective immunity from extradition, but such warrants are usually enforced by the police.

It is not clear whether Mr. Assange's request at the embassy was made instead of an application to the European court for a last appeal. A lawyer for Mr. Assange did not respond to calls for comment. But Scotland Yard confirmed Wednesday that Mr. Assange had breached the bail curfew set by the British court in staying at the embassy overnight. He is now "subject to arrest," it said, and "officers are aware of his location." It means that dedicated supporters in Britain, who had put up nearly \$380,000 in bail to ensure his freedom, now risk losing their money.

If Ecuador declines his application, Mr. Assange will be arrested and likely jailed. If it accepts his application, he faces the apparent prospect of having to flee the safe haven of the embassy for a sprint to South America before the British police can lay their hands on him. Further, as well as the European arrest warrant which he has been served, and apparently seeks to avoid by moving continents, Mr. Assange was subject to an international Interpol red notice. A spokeswoman said that notice would remain in effect until Sweden had revoked it. Swedish prosecutors said Wednesday that his request for asylum will make no difference to "the criminal investigation in Sweden."

The sudden move Tuesday represents another narrowing of Mr. Assange's horizons. He, and WikiLeaks, rose to prominence in 2010 on a radical global vision for transparency and openness. But the organization fell from the limelight as a spate of defections left it unable to process and publish fresh leaks.

Mr. Assange was in effect placed under house arrest over the Swedish accusations in December 2010, and he has turned his energy to fighting what one of his lawyers has called a "honey trap" set to silence him, and to raising money for his legal fees.

Friends have said Mr. Assange feels he cannot get justice in Sweden. He is fearful of conditions in Swedish jails, and the prospect of later extradition to the United States, they have said. In speeches, he had joked about running away to Moscow or Havana.

Instead, he chose Ecuador as his potential refuge. He recently interviewed its president, Rafael Correa, on a talk show Mr. Assange hosts on the Kremlin-financed television network Russia Today. The two men bonded, often in fits of mutual laughter, over their disdain for the American government.

Last year Mr. Correa expelled the American ambassador to Ecuador over comments made public in a diplomatic cable

released by WikiLeaks. The ambassador, Heather M. Hodges, had made accusations of high-level police corruption and suggested that Mr. Correa might have known about it.