

Journalist: Leaker of top-secret documents fled US fearing unfair trial

By Kelvin Chan, Associated Press

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HONG KONG — The American intelligence contractor who disclosed U.S. government surveillance programs fled to Hong Kong because he believed he wouldn't get a fair trial in his home country, the journalist who broke the story said Monday.



Glenn Greenwald of the British-based Guardian newspaper said Edward Snowden chose the semiautonomous Chinese region because it was the least bad option open to him.

Greenwald said in an interview that Snowden wants to remain out of the "clutches" of the U.S. government for as long as possible but is fully aware that he won't succeed.

Snowden says he worked as a contractor at the National Security Agency and the CIA.

He allowed the Guardian and The Washington Post newspapers to reveal his identity on Sunday as the source of a series of top-secret documents outlining two NSA surveillance programs.

The Guardian reported that Snowden arrived in Hong Kong on May 20. He checked out of the Mira Hotel on Monday and his current location is unclear.

The Justice Department is conducting a criminal investigation into the leaks at the request of the NSA.

"If the Justice Department does end up indicting him, which almost certainly it will — it's basically inevitable at this point — he doesn't really trust the judicial system in the United States to give him a fair trial," Greenwald said in Hong Kong.

"I think if he trusted the political system and the political culture in the United States he would have just remained there and said 'I did what I did and I want to defend it,'" Greenwald said.

He said Snowden chose Hong Kong because it has a history of strong political activism, free speech and respect for the rule of law. But he added that once Snowden decided to leak the information, "all of the options, as he put it, are bad options. There were no good options for him."

Hong Kong, a former British colony, was handed back to China in 1997 but was allowed to retain a high degree of autonomy and its own legal system. The city has an extradition treaty with the U.S., but it contains some exceptions, including for crimes deemed political.

Greenwald said Snowden had watched with concern the court martial of Bradley Manning, the U.S. Army private on trial for handing a trove of classified material to WikiLeaks, and that it had raised fears for him about secrecy and "abridgement of due process."

Snowden, 29, believes he will eventually end up with the same fate as Manning, Greenwald said.

"I think that his goal is to avoid ending up in the clutches of the U.S. government for as long as he can, knowing full well though that it's very likely that he won't succeed and he will end up exactly where he doesn't want to be," Greenwald said.

Snowden told The Guardian that he hoped for asylum in Iceland, which he believed was a champion of Internet freedom, though Greenwald said as far as he was aware, he hadn't filed a claim for asylum anywhere.

When asked why Snowden didn't just head to Iceland, Greenwald said he was unsure but guessed that because the North Atlantic nation is a small country, it would find it much more difficult to say no to the United States than Beijing or Hong Kong.

"There's a lot of history in terms of small Scandinavian countries or small countries in Europe succumbing to U.S. demands and doing things that are contrary to their values or even their law," Greenwald said. "I think he feels that won't happen here."

It's unclear how Snowden, who earned \$200,000 a year while working at Booz Allen Hamilton Holding Corp., was funding his stay in Hong Kong. Greenwald said he had been "living on credit cards essentially for the last several weeks."

But he added that since Snowden revealed his identity, he has been contacted by "countless people" offering to pay for "anything he might need."