

US, British media keep pushing smear of WikiLeaks founder

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Reports appearing in the US and British press Tuesday seem aimed at lending credence to the politically motivated accusations of rape against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and rebutting Assange's claim that he is the target of a smear campaign instigated by the Pentagon and CIA.

Late last month WikiLeaks published 76,000 internal US Army reports that document hundreds of illegal killings of Afghan civilians between 2003 and the end of 2009. The group says it is reviewing another 15,000 reports of a similar kind, in preparation for posting them in the next few weeks.

Swedish prosecutors filed the rape charge last Friday, dropped it on Saturday, then revealed they were still considering a lesser charge of sexual "molestation" (a misdemeanor offense akin to disorderly conduct) while continuing to defend the initial decision to charge Assange with rape.

Assange, an Australian citizen, has been in Sweden most of the past month. He has been negotiating with Swedish media and political groups on ways to defend his organization from US government retaliation. One local advocate of Internet freedom, the Pirate Party, has agreed to provide additional server space for WikiLeaks, free of charge.

The political nature of the rape charge is evident on its face, since it was first reported by a right-wing Swedish tabloid, *Expressen*, after Assange announced he was becoming a columnist for a Swedish daily, *Aftonbladet*, in an effort to gain the protection of Sweden's more liberal press laws.

Contrary to normal procedure in Sweden, the prosecutor's office made public both the rape charge and the issuance of an arrest warrant for Assange. The prosecutor involved has now been reported to the

Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman of Justice by the Organization for Safe Legal Proceedings, a local watchdog group.

A representative of the group, Johann Binninge, pointed out at least two violations: the prosecutor filed charges and issued an arrest warrant without ever speaking with Assange. "When accusations come in, prosecutors don't even check facts before they take coercive measures, and this is contrary to Swedish laws," he said. In addition, confirming the charges to the media violates Swedish privacy laws.

A lengthy report in the British daily newspaper the *Guardian* gave numerous details about the case, clearly derived from police and prosecution sources, describing the two alleged victims and the circumstances in which they claimed to have encountered Assange, including the exact dates and time of day, but giving only first initials instead of names. The newspaper's account suggests that Assange precipitated his own arrest by refusing to be tested for HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases after having sex with the women.

The US television network CNN highlighted the assertions of the attorney for the two women who were the alleged victims of rape, denying that the US government had anything to do with the charges against Assange. Claes Borgstrom declared, "What I can say is that those rumors that the Pentagon or the CIA are supposed to be involved lack all connection with reality." Borgstrom said that he first met his two clients on Monday, two days after the charges against Assange had been withdrawn, but he refused to give any details of the alleged assaults, other than reiterating the claim that at least one of them constituted rape.

CNN also reported the claim by the Swedish authorities that they issued a warrant out of fear that Assange might leave the country, not because of

international pressure. “The prosecutor was also made aware that the individual concerned was a foreign national and that he was about to leave the country,” an official chronology says.

An even more overtly pro-Pentagon report appeared in the *New York Times*, which sent its London-based correspondent John Burns—a long-time conduit for US government propaganda in Iraq—to Stockholm to cover the charges against Assange. The headline gives the gist of the article: “Plotting Doubted in WikiLeaks Case.” It attacked the claim of Assange and supporters of WikiLeaks that the charges are the product of a “dirty tricks” campaign by the US government.

While noting that charges against Assange are still under review, the main purpose of the article was to rebut the charges against the Pentagon and CIA, with the declaration that “those who say they have detailed knowledge of the case discount conspiracy theories linking it to efforts to discredit WikiLeaks.”

In a peculiarly circular argument, Burns writes, “the conspiratorial view has found no backing from the prosecutor’s office.” This is hardly a surprise: should the reader expect that one of the participants in the conspiracy will simply acknowledge its existence when the *New York Times* rings them up?

Like the *Guardian*, the *Times* account gives a few more details about the two women who allegedly went to the police with their complaints about Assange. The source of these details could only be the police, the prosecutor’s office, or the right-wing Swedish press, working as their mouthpiece.

And to top off his exoneration of the US government, Burns ends his article with a quote from an anonymous “close friend” of Assange, who claims that the case arose from personal conflicts among the three people involved, and concludes: “This wasn’t anything to do with the Pentagon.”

The *Guardian* and the *New York Times* were the two daily newspapers given an advance look at the Afghanistan war reports by Assange. Both papers, along with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, prepared lengthy articles that were published simultaneously with the posting of the entire repository of documents by WikiLeaks. Their aggressive role in covering the Assange rape story seems motivated partly by the desire to curry favor with those in the US and British military-intelligence establishment who may have been

offended by the initial stories—although at least in the case of the *Times*, the newspaper discussed with the Obama White House how to handle the documents.



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