Julian Assange replies to media smear campaign

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In a lengthy interview with BBC News , broadcast Tuesday, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange answered many of the smears directed by the media against him as part of a campaign to discredit the organization as it releases of thousands of secret US diplomatic cables.

It was Assange's first face-to-face broadcast interview since his release from jail December 17, after spending nine days in London's Wandsworth prison on an extradition arrest warrant from Sweden. The presenter of the BBC's "Today" program, John Humphrys, focused the interview almost entirely on the trumped-up claims of sexual assault that are the basis of the Swedish warrant, although no actual charges have been filed against Assange.

The entire tenor of the interview is that of a prosecutor interrogating a prisoner, not one journalist engaging in a discussion with another. The BBC man might as well have been wearing a badge.

Humphrys's first question was "Why won't you go back to Sweden?" suggesting that Assange's resistance to extradition was proof that he had something to hide. Assange replied by explaining that he had left Sweden with the permission of the Swedish authorities, after they had failed to follow up on an initial request to interview him. He had agreed to answer any questions about his sexual encounters with two Swedish women, both consensual.

"I stayed in Sweden for five weeks to enable that proper process to occur," Assange explained. "Proper process did not occur."

It was only after he left the country, he continued, that a Swedish prosecutor demanded an interview, and refused to conduct it by videoconference, by deposition, or face-to-face in London, where Assange was working on his organization's efforts to publish secret US government documents.

Humphrys said that Assange was obliged to go back to Sweden "because the law says you must." Assange replied, "Well, no, the law says that I also have certain rights. I do not need to go and speak to random prosecutors around the world who simply want to have a chat and won't do it in any other standard way."

Moreover, he pointed out, "they have asked, as part of their application that, if I go to Sweden and am arrested, that I am to be held incommunicado. Entirely incommunicado. They have asked that my Swedish lawyer be gagged from talking about the evidence to the public."

In other words, the demands from Sweden served the purpose, not of furthering an investigation into a sex crime, but of disrupting the functioning of WikiLeaks by seizing and gagging the group's principal leader.

"I have an organisation to run," he continued. "I have my people to defend. There are other things at stake here… I have a serious brewing extradition case in relation to the United States. I have a serious organisation to run. People affiliated with our organisation have already been assassinated. My work is serious. I do not have to run off to random states simply because some prosecutor is abusing a process in those states."

The BBC interviewer repeated the claim that two women have accused Assange of a serious criminal offense, but Assange pointed out that the women did not go to the police seeking to file charges, and that no charges have actually been brought by any prosecutor.

Instead of bringing charges, the prosecutor has sought to have Assange forcibly returned to Sweden for questioning, while leaking material to the press, including a long and hostile account of the alleged "sexual assault," published by the *Guardian* on Saturday.

Humphrys suggested that it was a double standard for the leader of an organization that accepts leaks of secret information to complain about others leaking, but Assange replied that publishing secret material about government misconduct was far different from targeting an individual.

"We are an organization that promotes justice through the mechanism of transparency and journalism," he said. "When a powerful organization that has internal policies, that is meant to be creating and following the law, i.e., Swedish prosecution's judicial system, abuses its own regulation and its own position to attack an individual, that is an abuse of

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power."

Assange pointed out that in this case, Sweden was acting not as an advanced democratic country, but as a "banana republic," i.e., a regime that was entirely subservient to the demands of the most powerful imperialist nation, the United States.

Rather than take up this suggestion, Humphrys turned the discussion back to the details of Assange's sex life, demanding answers to the most personal questions. Humphrys even asked him how many women he had slept with in his life, which the WikiLeaks leader flatly declined to answer.

Humphrys pressed Assange to admit that he had sex with both women in Sweden—something he has never denied.

Assange's response deserves full quotation: "It's a matter of public record as far as the courts are concerned but I am not going to be exposing other people's private lives or my own more than is absolutely necessary. That is not what a gentleman does, that's why I have also never criticized these women. We don't know precisely what pressures they have been under, exactly. There are powerful interests that have incentives to promote these smears. That doesn't mean that they got in there in the very beginning and fabricated them."

Assange continued that he found it improbable that the two women had been working for US security agencies when he met them. "I have never said that this is a honey-trap," he said, adding that press reports that his lawyer had made such a charge were based on misquotation.

"It appears, from the records that we do have, the suggestion is that they went to the police for advice and they did not want to make a complaint," he said.

In another interview, Assange explained that the issue became the subject of intensive interest to police and prosecutors only after the intervention of Claes Borgstrom, the right-wing social democrat and former government official who is now representing the two women.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the BBC interview was the seeming indifference on the part of Humphrys to the issues of democratic rights raised by the threats against WikiLeaks. Assange noted that his organization has been subject to death threats, but Humphrys would not deviate from the "sex" issue to discuss the threat of assassination.

Humphrys criticized the release of material by WikiLeaks from two diametrically opposed standpoints, because "the vast-majority of it was tittle-tattle" and because it included highly sensitive security details that were of no interest to anyone "apart from people who might potentially benefit, like terrorists."

Assange pointed out the contradiction in this line of questioning, then responded, "I believe none of it is dangerous. Vastly more detailed things have been released by the United States government itself, by Congress. For example, a year-and-a-half ago it released a list of all US nuclear sites."

When Humprhys suggested that "the elected government of that nation" was entitled to make decisions about what information to release, while "you are getting leaks illegally."

"Not illegally," Assange responded. "We have been victorious in every single court case we have ever had. Legality is something for the highest court in the land to decide. It is not what a general claims. Revealing illegal behavior is in most countries not illegal. We are a publisher. We accept information from whistleblowers. We vet it, we analyze it and we publish it and that's what we do."

Humprhys concluded with this observation, "It is illegal to hack into protected sites. It is illegal."

"Where is the suggestion that any of the things we have published about government sites have come from illegal hacking?" Assange asked. "The allegations are in this case, that an intelligence agent walked out with the material on a CD. That's the allegation."

There is not the slightest acknowledgement throughout the interview that the US government in particular, and all governments worldwide, routinely engage in illegal and underhanded activity, or that WikiLeaks is performing a public service by exposing the conflict between what governments say officially, and what they say and do privately.

In an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, one of the four European newspapers given advance access to the entire trove of diplomatic cables being posted on WikiLeaks, Assange revealed that there have been numerous death threats against him, mainly from American military personnel.

The threats were so frequent, he said, that British police cut short his appearance on the steps of the High Court last week, after his release, out of concern that he would be killed on the spot. "I could have stayed there talking for an hour," he said, "but the police were worried because I could have been assassinated—or something like that."

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