Lawyer for Assange: US has empanelled secret grand jury against WikiLeaks leader

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As WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was preparing to appear today before a London court to appeal a judge's denial of bail, his attorney Mark Stephens warned that Sweden had instigated legal proceedings in order to hand Assange over to the US authorities.

Speaking with interviewer David Frost on al-Jazeera television, Stephens said, "We have heard from the Swedish authorities there has been a secretly empanelled grand jury in Alexandria…just over the river from Washington DC, next to the Pentagon."

Sweden is seeking to question Assange on trumped-up sexual assault charges that have been instigated by right-wing elements in Sweden, backed by the US government, in order to disrupt the efforts of WikiLeaks to continue publishing documents that expose US military atrocities and diplomatic conspiracies around the world.

In the al-Jazeera interview, Stephens said, "[T]he Swedes, we understand, have said that if he comes to Sweden, they will defer their interest in him to the Americans. Now that shows some level of collusion and embarrassment, so it does seem to me what we have here is nothing more than holding charges…so ultimately they can get their mitts on him."

These remarks are the most direct allegation from Assange's defense team that the Swedish charges are simply a device to seize the WikiLeaks leader and then turn him over for prosecution by the US government, or perhaps to be detained in a military or CIA prison.

The US wants to prosecute Assange for his role in the WikiLeaks exposures, but Justice Department prosecutors have yet to make public any legal basis for doing so. The secret federal grand jury in Alexandria would have been convened by the US attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, who has prosecuted many high-profile terrorism cases, including that against Zacarias Moussaoui, an Al Qaeda member who was detained while training at a Minnesota flight school before the 9/11 attacks.

A grand jury from the Eastern District would almost certainly include people employed by or with family connections to the US national security apparatus, since the Pentagon, Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Homeland Security all have their headquarters in the area.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians in Washington have jumped on the bandwagon of demonizing Assange and WikiLeaks. The outgoing Democratic chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, John Conyers of Detroit, will hold a public hearing Thursday to discuss "legal and constitutional issues raised by WikiLeaks," including the possible use of the Espionage Act to prosecute him.

The incoming chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, Republican Peter King of Long Island, introduced a bill last week to make it illegal to publish the names of those who supply information to the US military or intelligence agencies. King has called on Attorney General Eric Holder to prosecute Assange under the Espionage Act.

King said his new bill, the Securing Human Intelligence and Enforcing Lawful Dissemination (SHIELD) Act, would remove any ambiguity about whether Assange, an Australian citizen who published documents sent to him anonymously, could be charged with violating US law. Three US senators have introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

In his comments to al-Jazeera, Stephens also previewed some of the arguments that Assange's defense team will make at Tuesday's court hearing in London. "He is entitled under international law, under Swedish law, to know the charges or the investigation

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that's going on, the allegations made against him and the nature of the evidence which is said to support it," Stephens said. "As I sit here talking to you now, he hasn't that information, so he's not been able to comprehensively rebut" the charges against him.

"Julian remains prepared to meet consensually with the Swedish prosecutor should she care to come to London," he continued. "There is not a necessity for a show trial if she doesn't want it."

The legal case against Assange is increasingly discredited in Britain, not only because of the suspicions of Swedish-US collusion, but because of the conduct of the London court itself. The same magistrate, Howard Riddle, who denied bail to Assange December 7, granted bail the following day to a 30-year-old businessman, Shrien Dewani, facing charges of conspiring to murder his wife during their honeymoon in South Africa.

While Dewani faces charges of attempted murder, Assange has not been officially charged with any crime. He is sought by Swedish authorities for questioning in relation to claims by two women that he sexually assaulted them. The disparity in Riddle's treatment of the two cases strongly suggests that a political motive was behind the denial of bail to Assange.

In a lengthy analysis of the purported assaults, the *Independent* found that even if the two women are deemed credible witnesses—despite evidence that a right-wing politician prompted them to file charges—there is still no case to be made to sustain a conviction.

The article explained: "But with no forensic evidence taken or available, all of these alleged offences seem to be a matter of one adult's word against that of another. Unless recording devices were in use in the two bedrooms concerned, or there are details…yet to be made public, it is very hard to see how the offences could be conclusively proved."

In a letter to the *Guardian* published Friday, supporters of Assange, headed by investigative journalist John Pilger, called for his release. "We protest at the attacks on WikiLeaks and, in particular, on Julian Assange," they wrote, adding that the publication of secret documents had "assisted democracy in revealing the real views of our governments over a range of issues."

The letter continued: "All we knew about the mass killing, torture and corruption in Iraq and Afghanistan has been confirmed. The world's leaders can no longer hide the truth by simply lying to the public. The lies have been exposed."

The letter also condemned the actions of corporations like Amazon, the Swiss banks and credit card companies in bowing to US government pressure to cut off financial payments to WikiLeaks from its supporters.

Besides Pilger, the letter was signed by numerous artists: comedians Alexei Sale, Mark Thomas, AL Kennedy and Terry Jones (of Monty Python); actors Miriam Margolyes, Celia Mitchell, Roger Lloyd Pack and Andy de la Tour; playwright Caryl Churchill; designers David Gentleman and Katharine Hamnett; and writer Iain Banks.

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