

WikiLeaks founder defiant after release from British jail

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In a series of interviews Thursday evening and Friday morning, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said that his organization had emerged stronger from the attacks by Swedish, British and US political authorities and that Internet postings of secret US diplomatic cables would continue indefinitely.

Assange made the statements during the first 24 hours after his release from Wandsworth Prison in London, the Victorian-era jail where he had been detained for nine days on an extradition warrant from Sweden, where he faces trumped-up charges of sexual assault.

Speaking to reporters in London Thursday evening after his release from prison, Assange called the Swedish investigation “a smear campaign.”

“It’s the case with anyone that’s a head of an organization that is exposing major powers and has major opposition that they will be attacked, every aspect of their life will be scrutinized,” he said.

“That is not to say that this originated, we do not have proof of that, that this originated as an attempt to attack the organization, but certainly once it was under way, it has been used, very aggressively, to attack the organization.”

He noted the “sneering smile of Defense Secretary Gates upon hearing, upon my arrest, looking like he had swallowed the canary...”

Assange said, “One of the concerns that we have had since I have been in the UK is whether the extradition proceeding to Sweden, which is occurring in a very strange and unusual way, is actually an attempt to get me into a jurisdiction which will then make it easier to extradite me to the United States.”

In comments to reporters at the manor house in rural Suffolk where he is living under virtual house arrest, Assange called an extradition attempt by the United States “increasingly serious and increasingly likely.”

There were other forms of attack, he said. WikiLeaks faced “what appears to be an illegal investigation...certain people who are alleged to be affiliated to us have been detained, followed around, had their computers seized and so on.” He said that more than 85 percent of the organization’s time and resources were required to fight off the combination of technical and legal attacks.

The public calls by in the United States for his arrest and even assassination were “very serious,” he said. “The United States has shown recently that its institutions seem to be failing to follow the rule of law. And dealing with a superpower that does not appear to be following the rule of law is a serious business.”

In interviews with two US morning television programs, the Today Show on NBC and Good Morning America on ABC, Assange adamantly declared his innocence of the charges in Sweden, pointing out that Swedish authorities have never presented any evidence against him, either in court or to his Swedish lawyers.

He warned that the sole purpose of the charges was to provide the basis for detaining him and extraditing him to the United States, where a secret grand jury may have already indicted him on charges of violating the Espionage Act.

“The whole damn thing is kept secret,” he told the Today Show. “Something is wrong in the United States that such an investigation against me and, in effect, my organization ... is to be conducted in secret.”

He express concern over the treatment of Bradley Manning, the US Army private who has been detained by the military on suspicion of being the source of at least some of the material leaked to WikiLeaks. (See, “Accused WikiLeaks source Bradley Manning held in solitary confinement”)

When ABC interviewer George Stephanopoulos

noted a report in Friday's *New York Times*, suggesting that the US government might charge Assange with conspiring with Manning to obtain US military and diplomatic documents, Assange responded, "I had never heard of the name Bradley Manning before it was published in the press. WikiLeaks technology was designed from the very beginning to make sure that we never know the identities or names of people submitting material." That was the only way to assure sources they would be protected, he said.

Asked by Stephanopoulos whether the charges in Sweden were the result of a set-up, Assange said, "There are intercepted SMS messages between the two women that I am told are a setup, but the Swedish police have refused to release them. " Asked whether he had sex with the two women against their will, he replied, "Absolutely not."

On both US television programs, when the interviewers suggested that the WikiLeaks exposures were endangering the lives of diplomats or "sabotaging peace," Assange responded by holding up the Friday edition of the *Guardian*, the British newspaper that was given access to the entire trove of diplomatic cables, and beginning to read from its cover story on the systemic use of torture by Indian forces in Kashmir.

This type of exposure would continue indefinitely, he suggested, pointing out to ABC that only 2,000 of the 250,000 secret cables have so far been made public on the WikiLeaks site.

At a congressional hearing Thursday in Washington, a half dozen legal experts and civil liberties advocates said that charging Assange under the Espionage Act was unlikely, because no jury has ever convicted a journalist or other recipient of secret information under its provisions.

Congressman John Conyers, outgoing chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, who convened the hearing, remarked in passing that the incoming Congress would certainly be revisiting the Espionage Act, suggesting that legislative action to provide a new basis for criminalizing WikiLeaks was likely.

At a press conference in the US capital the same day, Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times* in 1971, spoke out strongly in support of both Assange and Bradley Manning. Ellsberg, now 79, called Manning a "brother" who, if he provided the documents to WikiLeaks, performed "a very admirable

act."

He said the actions of Manning and Assange no more warranted prosecutions than those of the *Times* in publishing the Pentagon Papers or the *Washington Post* in its uncovering of the Watergate conspiracy.



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