

Julian Assange demands end to US witch-hunt

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WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange spoke from a balcony of the Ecuadorean embassy in London yesterday, denouncing the US persecution of himself and WikiLeaks and exposing moves by the British government to storm the embassy last week as Ecuador had prepared to grant him diplomatic asylum.

In another display of intimidation by the British government, an estimated 200 police lined the streets around the embassy and occupied the front steps of the building as Assange addressed hundreds of supporters and media representatives.

Assange said that last Wednesday night he heard police “storming” through the building’s fire escapes, but the presence of his supporters outside had prevented his arrest. “If the UK did not throw away the terms of the Vienna Convention, it was because the world was watching,” he said.

Britain’s Conservative-led coalition government had threatened to withdraw its recognition of the Ecuadorean embassy and send police to seize Assange, in blatant violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which requires diplomatic posts to be treated as the territory of the foreign nation.

The British government declined to comment on Assange’s statement, thus not denying that police had entered the building. The government is making little secret of its plans to forcibly remove the WikiLeaks founder to Sweden, on the pretext of answering trumped-up sexual assault allegations, facilitating his transfer to the US to be tried for espionage.

It is increasingly obvious that the Obama administration and its allies, including the governments of Britain, Sweden and Australia—Assange’s country of citizenship—are intent on trampling over international law and basic democratic rights in order to incarcerate Assange and shut down WikiLeaks. Assange’s only

“crime” is to have published hundreds of thousands of documents exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq and the reactionary machinations of the imperialist powers.

Assange warned that as long as WikiLeaks remained under threat, “so does the freedom of expression and the health of all of our societies.” The US government was in danger of “lurching off the precipice, dragging us all into a dangerous and oppressive world in which journalists fall silent under the fear of prosecution and citizens must whisper in the dark.”

Assange declared that the US “must renounce its witch-hunt against WikiLeaks,” “dissolve its FBI investigation,” “vow that it will not seek to prosecute our staff or our supporters” and “pledge before the world that it will not pursue journalists for shining a light on the secret crimes of the powerful.”

The WikiLeaks founder also demanded the release of Bradley Manning. The US Army private, accused of leaking incriminating documents to WikiLeaks, has been detained and abused for more than 850 days in an obvious attempt to coerce him into implicating WikiLeaks. That would lay the legal basis for Assange to be charged with “conspiracy to commit espionage.”

Assange said that Manning “remains in a military prison in Fort Leavenworth Kansas, was found by the UN to have endured months of torturous detention in Quantico Virginia, and has yet—after two years in prison—to see a trial.” Assange added: “[I]f Bradley Manning really did as he is accused, he is a hero, an example to us all and one of the world’s foremost political prisoners.”

On all these issues, Assange appealed to US President Barack Obama to “do the right thing.” But the Obama administration immediately made clear that it had no intention of halting its operation against Assange by

declaring that it did not recognise diplomatic asylum.

The Ecuadorean government has relied on a 1954 Organisation of American States (OAS) agreement to allow asylum in diplomatic missions for “persons being sought for political reasons.” The State Department said the United States was “not a party to the 1954 OAS Convention on Diplomatic Asylum and does not recognise the concept of diplomatic asylum as a matter of international law.”

Earlier, British Foreign Secretary William Hague had also declared: “The United Kingdom does not recognise the principle of diplomatic asylum.” These statements underscore the utter lawlessness of the US and its partners.

While the US refused to sign the 1954 convention, it has often used its embassies to protect selected individuals for its own political purposes. Just three months ago, in May, Chinese human rights campaigner Chen Guangcheng fled to the American embassy in Beijing after evading house arrest and was quickly granted asylum in the US.

In a separate move, the White House voted against convening an emergency OAS meeting in Washington this Friday to discuss Ecuador’s objections to the British threats to its embassy. Only Canada and Trinidad and Tobago joined the US in opposing the resolution, which passed 23 to 3. Foreign ministers of the Union of South American Nations also expressed “solidarity” with Ecuador and urged the parties “to pursue dialogue in search of a mutually acceptable solution.”

In a weekend national address, Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa denounced as “intolerable and explicit” the British threat to storm the London embassy. He said his country had decided to grant Assange asylum after failing to secure assurances from Britain and Sweden that the WikiLeaks founder would not be extradited to a third country, “as that would put Mr Assange’s life and freedom at risk.”

When Ecuador’s foreign minister, Ricardo Patino, announced the asylum decision last week, he revealed that his government had also specifically asked the US government (1) whether there were any existing or intended legal process against Assange and/or WikiLeaks, (2) what maximum penalties would apply, and (3) whether it planned to request Assange’s extradition to the US. The Obama administration

refused to provide any information about the Assange case.

Sweden also rejected an offer by Ecuador to allow Swedish prosecutors to question Assange at the embassy, in person or via videoconference. This fact exposes the efforts of the media in Britain and internationally to blacken Assange’s name by portraying him as a self-serving evader of Swedish sex “charges.”

The truth is that Assange has consistently offered to be questioned in Britain. Moreover, no charges have even been laid against him. The allegations were concocted by the Swedish police and prosecuting authorities in late 2010 after two women had consensual relations with him (see: “Australian TV program exposes Assange frame-up”).

There is no doubt that the Swedish frame-up was politically timed. It came just as the Obama administration orchestrated the convening of a secret US Grand Jury to examine possible charges against Assange, including “conspiracy to communicate or transmit national defence information” and “conspiracy to commit espionage.”



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