

WikiLeaks, Assange targets of active FBI probe

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Court documents released this week confirm that the FBI and US Justice Department are continuing an active “criminal/national security” investigation against WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange.

The documents were provided to the US District Court in Washington, DC in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit filed by the US-based Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). They prove that the Obama administration’s political persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks continues, more than four years after the media organization first provoked Washington’s ire with the publication of the “Collateral Murder” video, a US attack helicopter’s gunsight footage from a 2007 Baghdad airstrike in which Iraqi children, journalists and other civilians were shot and killed.

The “Collateral Murder” posting was followed by the publication of thousands of documents detailing US war crimes in Afghanistan and then of diplomatic cables exposing Washington’s machinations around the globe.

EPIC filed the suit in November 2011 after the US government opened its criminal investigation against WikiLeaks and pressured web hosts and payment processors into severing all relations with the organization. It also became public that the government was attempting to identify those who accessed the documents and was issuing direct orders to US military and civilian government employees not to do so.

The US investigation was initiated following the May 2010 arrest of Private First Class Chelsea Bradley Manning, who was tried on charges of espionage and “aiding the enemy.” Manning was subsequently sentenced to 35 years in prison, the most draconian punishment ever for a government whistleblower.

The FOIL suit sought all records regarding

“individuals targeted for surveillance” in connection with WikiLeaks, all lists of names compiled of individuals who had supported or indicated interest in the media organization and all records of communications between the government and social media companies, such as Facebook and Google, as well as financial service companies, including Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal, regarding WikiLeaks.

Since the suit was filed, revelations by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden established that the NSA was spying on everyone, US citizens included, who visited the WikiLeaks web site.

In a document filed with the Washington, DC court on Monday, US prosecutors said that making public the requested documents would cause “articulable harm” to the Justice Department’s and FBI’s ongoing investigation and should remain secret “pending prosecution.”

The document gives the lie to the story leaked by Justice Department officials last November to the *Washington Post* that there was no intention of prosecuting Assange, because trying him would raise the question of why other major newspapers and news organizations that published stories based on the WikiLeaks documents were not also in the dock.

Based on this phony claim, a media campaign was mounted to portray Assange as “paranoid” and “self-aggrandizing” for seeking diplomatic asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and resisting extradition to Sweden, where he is sought for questioning regarding trumped-up sexual assault allegations.

Assange has been trapped in the embassy for nearly two years. Last month, London’s Metropolitan Police revealed, in response to another freedom of information request, that police pay and overtime for the continuous

24-hour siege that has been mounted at the embassy has cost over \$9 million.

Assange and his lawyers have resisted extradition on the grounds that Sweden would likely comply with a US request to extradite him to face charges of espionage and treason in an American court. Assange has insisted that there is a “99.97 percent chance” that he would be sent to the US for trial if he leaves the Ecuadorian Embassy. The refusal of Swedish prosecutors to interview Assange in London on the allegations—he has never been formally charged—makes clear that there is an undeclared motive behind the extradition request.

The papers filed in the government’s response to the FOIL suit describe the Justice Department/FBI probe of WikiLeaks as “active and ongoing” and “a multi-subject, criminal investigation.” It added that there had been “developments in the investigation over the last year.”

Documents released by Edward Snowden and published last February revealed that the NSA collected the IP addresses of all computers visiting WikiLeaks and had placed Assange on an agency “manhunting list” that includes alleged terrorists targeted for drone assassination. It had also proposed classifying the WikiLeaks founder as a “malicious foreign agent,” a designation that would allow the NSA to impose a blanket surveillance on WikiLeaks, unencumbered by any restraints on spying on US citizens.



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