

Assange says he may soon leave Ecuadorian embassy

Robert Stevens
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Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, said at a press conference Monday that he would “soon” be leaving the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

Assange has been at the embassy for more than two years, forced to seek refuge there in June 2012 after the UK courts attempted to railroad him to Sweden on trumped up allegations of sexual assault. Ecuador offered Assange asylum and is seeking safe conduct from the UK.

He was first arrested in London in December 2010 under a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) issued by the Swedish authorities. No charges were laid against him and he was only required to return in order to answer questions. Swedish prosecutors subsequently rejected many requests by Assange for Swedish officials to question him in the UK.

The press conference was held amid reports that Assange’s health has worsened considerably due to his confinement in a room just 15 feet by 13, with no access to sunlight. Assange alluded to the toll the ordeal was taking on him:

“Being detained in various ways in this country without charge for four years and in this embassy for two years which has no outside area, therefore no sunlight... it is an environment in which any healthy person would find themselves soon enough with certain difficulties...

“The United Nations minimum standard for prisoners is one hour a day of outside exercise. Even when I was in Wandsworth prison in solitary confinement [in 2010], that was respected.”

WikiLeaks spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson told reporters, “The plan, as always, is to leave as soon as the UK government decides to honour its obligations in relation to international agreements.” Assange “is ready to leave at any moment as soon as the ridiculous

siege outside will stop and he is offered safe passage.”

There is a permanent 24-hour police guard stationed outside the embassy with instructions to arrest him if he sets foot outside the door, at a cost now exceeding £7 million. As Assange’s press conference proceeded at least 20 police were stationed at the embassy.

Assange spoke alongside Ricardo Patino, the Ecuadorian foreign minister, who said his government reaffirmed its commitment to offer Assange asylum.

Patino wrote an article in the *Guardian* that day citing the importance of the revelations made available to the world’s population by Assange, as well as those leaked by US National Security Agency whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

The decision to offer Assange asylum, “followed a dramatic change in our global understanding of privacy, telecommunications and diplomacy over the past few years. Edward Snowden’s revelations about mass surveillance have uncovered grave security threats for states, violations of human rights and have shown that the future of the internet is in danger. The millions of documents published by WikiLeaks about the political, economic and military manoeuvres of powerful interests also magnified delicate matters of sovereignty and abuse of power.”

Just 24 hours prior to the press conference journalist Sarah Oliver noted in a *Daily Mail* article that Assange’s appearance had deteriorated since she last saw him eight months ago. “His usually pale skin is now almost translucent and on his face it is so puffy it looks as if it is lifting off his naturally sharp cheekbones. He has a chronic cough, which the installation of a humidifier to moisten the dry, air-conditioned atmosphere has done little to ease. His eyes have navy pools of shadow beneath them, suggesting that he’s shifted from nocturnal to sleep-deprived”,

said Oliver.

She continued, “Assange is, according to a WikiLeaks source, suffering from the potentially life-threatening heart condition arrhythmia and has a chronic lung complaint and dangerously high blood pressure.”

Of his confined living space Assange told her, “I can’t even keep a pot plant alive for long in here.”

Assange cannot leave the embassy and enter a hospital, even for a basic check-up, for fear of immediate arrest. Oliver noted, “The Ecuadorians have asked permission to take him to hospital—using a diplomatic car as an ambulance if the need arises—but it’s a request the Foreign Office has declined to answer.”

This vile abuse of his health and welfare was denounced by Patino in the *Guardian*. “Two years without sunlight and fresh air, unable to walk outside. It’s an injustice that an asylum seeker must remain prisoner of a stalled judicial process,” he said. “We are concerned about the consequences of an eventual medical emergency without access to hospital facilities or care.”

Speaking to the *Mail* Assange revealed the impact of his incarceration on his family:

“One of my children is trapped in a war zone. They live in a country in which the elected government has collapsed and violence has broken out. I cannot go there. As with any parent, my instinct is to protect but I can do nothing.” He added, “I have not seen my mother for two years, nor my grandmother, who is 87. In the time I have been in the embassy, both my stepfather and my grandfather have died.”

The British government, in collusion with the Swedish and US authorities, have given over huge resources to ensure Assange’s seizure and extradition. Once in Sweden he faces being swiftly extradited to the US, where the Obama administration has kept open a grand jury empanelled in 2010 to bring secret, unspecified charges against him.

Assange told the media, “How can it be that such a situation in Europe arises where a person is held and their freedom of movement is restricted and they are kept from their family while a foreign government, the US, builds an ever-larger case against that person and their organisation?”

In large part due to public concerns regarding the

undemocratic provisions of the EAW system, brought to light by the Assange case, legislation was passed last month by the UK Parliament specifying that a formal charge must be made against a person before their liberty is deprived.

Speaking at the conference about the change in law Assange said, “[I]t has come to pass ... that the British Parliament and the British legal community have seen the abuses of my rights and the rights of many other people who have been extradited without charge, adding he was, “thankful that the United Kingdom is standing up for long-held values of due process.”

Yet such is their determination to “Get Assange” that the government is blatantly flouting this newly passed extradition legislation. As was confirmed by the Home Office shortly after the press conference, the new legislation will not apply to Assange or anyone else deprived of their rights under the previous system. A Home Office spokeswoman said, “There were changes made to the law but they are not retrospective.”

Assange’s legal team in Sweden are currently appealing the latest move by the Swedish authorities to deny him justice.

The author also recommends:

Defend Julian Assange!

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