Despite Swedish interview request, WikiLeaks founder Assange remains in danger

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After years of refusals, Swedish prosecutors have formally offered to travel to London to question WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on allegations of sexual assault.

Per Samuelson, lawyer for Assange, welcomed the move as a small "victory". "The only thing which is irritating," he went on, "is that it comes so late because it has kept Julian Assange in the [Ecuadorian] embassy for over two-and-a-half years now."

The long-delayed request underscores that Assange is the victim of a politically motivated frame-up, which has seen him effectively held prisoner in the UK and forced into hiding for exposing the crimes of US imperialism.

Early in 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing 400,000 "top secret" documents disclosing the criminal operations of the US military in Afghanistan and Iraq. They included a video, "Collateral Murder", showing a US helicopter killing a group of civilians in Iraq, including two journalists employed by Reuters.

In August that year, Assange had sex with two women while in Sweden. Although both women acknowledge the sex was consensual, the incidents formed the basis for trumped-up allegations of rape.

The claims were initially dismissed by Stockholm Chief Prosecutor Eva Finne but quickly resurrected by lawyer Claes Borgstrom and prosecutor Marianne Ny, both attached to the Social Democratic Party.

Despite the absence of any formal charges, in November 2010, Ny issued a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) for Assange's extradition to Sweden from London, where he was continuing to direct WikiLeaks exposures.

This coincided with the decision of the US authorities to empanel a secret grand jury in September, aimed at uncovering and silencing those responsible for bringing its murderous activities to light on charges of espionage.

In July 2010, US private Chelsea (nee Bradley) Manning was arrested and later charged with "aiding and abetting" the enemy for passing material to WikiLeaks. Held in solitary confinement for much of the time, he was eventually convicted and sentenced to 35 years imprisonment in July 2013.

Rightly fearing that extradition to Sweden was only a pretext to engineer his own transfer to the US, where he would face similar treatment and worse, Assange spent 17 months under de facto house arrest fighting the UK courts against his removal.

When he had exhausted all legal avenues, in August 2012, Assange was forced to seek political asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy. He has remained trapped ever since, as the embassy is under 24-hour police guard, at a cost to the taxpayers of more than £10 million, with the purpose of arresting Assange and removing him to Sweden if he steps foot outside.

Throughout this whole time, more than four years and counting, the Swedish authorities had consistently refused Assange's request to be interviewed in London. This is despite numerous instances of Sweden interviewing allegations overseas. In 2012, the entire Stockholm district court set up for weeks in Kigali to interview eyewitnesses to genocide in Rwanda.

What appears to have brought about the change is the fact that some of the allegations against Assange will expire under the statute of limitation in August, although the alleged rape offence runs until 2020. Explaining the U-turn, Ny said that "time is of the essence."

Assange had also taken his case to Sweden's Supreme Court which, just days before the interview request, had agreed to hear his appeal against the EAW.

His lawyers had cited the prosecutor's refusal to interview Assange in London as amounting to "severe limitations" on his freedom, as such an interview is the essential first step in determining whether the WikiLeaks founder has any case to answer.

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Assange remains in grave danger. Samuelson said that the Swedish request contained preconditions, including that the Ecuadorean and UK authorities must both approve the interview. It also asked for a sample of Assange's DNA, although one was taken in 2010.

Ny's own statement made clear that nothing is resolved. Having previously questioned the "quality" of a London-based interview, Ny said she now viewed it as "necessary to accept such deficiencies" and "likewise take the risk that the interview does not move the case forward."

The US authorities have made clear that Assange remains a target.

On March 4, US District Court judge Barbara Rothstein rejected an application by the Electronic Privacy Information Centre for the release of documents under Freedom of Information laws.

Such disclosure would prejudice a "multi-subject investigation" into WikiLeaks that is "still active and ongoing," she ruled. It could also "expose the scope and methods of the investigation, and tip off subjects and other persons of investigative interest."

In December, Google revealed that it had been subject to a gag order preventing it from informing WikiLeaks employees that their email records had been turned over to the US authorities for almost two years.

All the Gmail account content of WikiLeaks staff, Sarah Harrison, Joseph Farrell and Kristinn Hrafnsson, had been surrendered by Google in response to search warrants issued by the federal authorities in March 2012.

In November 2013, Jeremy Hammond was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for hacking the private intelligence firm Stratfor and releasing material through WikiLeaks.

In January this year, former Anonymous activist Barrett Brown was sentenced to 63 months imprisonment by a Dallas Court for linking to Hammond's material.

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