

UK: Metropolitan Police threaten “covert” measures to arrest Julian Assange

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The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) announced Monday that it would no longer place officers around the Ecuadorean embassy in London for 24 hours a day.

Officers have guarded the embassy for 40 months, ever since WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange sought refuge there on June 19, 2012. The police were under instructions to arrest him the moment he set foot outside.

WikiLeaks has published numerous secret documents exposing war crimes carried out by the US government in Iraq and Afghanistan and conspiracies hatched by the State Department in countries around the world. Assange faced extradition to Sweden on false and politically motivated allegations of sexual misconduct. After exhausting all legal channels in the UK, he was granted refuge by Ecuador's government but was unable to travel there as his passport had been confiscated. The previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition denied him safe conduct to Ecuador, which granted him political asylum because he faces the threat of torture and death if sent to the US.

The unstated plan of the US authorities, in concert with the Swedish and British governments, is for Assange's eventual extradition to the United States. The Obama administration has kept open a grand jury empanelled in 2010 to bring unspecified charges against him.

He is a de facto prisoner, occupying a small room, with no access to the open air and natural sunlight, which has had a detrimental impact on his health. In 2014 it was reported that he has been diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening heart defect and a chronic lung condition.

According to the Met, their siege of the embassy has so far cost an estimated £12.6 million. This consists of £7.1 million in normal pay for police officers, £3.4

million in overtime pay and £2.1 million in indirect costs.

The decision to end the police presence was taken in full consultation with the Conservative government and in no way lessens the threat to Assange. What appears to be involved is a change in tactics, with the Met now concentrating on efforts to seize Assange in a “covert” operation.

The Met's statement, “Covert plan at Ecuadorian Embassy strengthened after removing dedicated guards,” states that Assange is subject to arrest under Section 7 of the Bail Act, for failing to surrender to custody on 29 June 2012 for removal to Sweden.”

It adds, “Whilst MPS remains committed to executing the arrest warrant and presenting Julian Assange before the court, it is only right that the policing operation to achieve this is continually reviewed against the diplomatic and legal efforts to resolve the situation... This decision has not been taken lightly, and the MPS has discussed it with the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.”

The statement warns, “The operation to arrest Julian Assange does however continue and should he leave the Embassy the MPS will make every effort to arrest him. ... The MPS will not discuss what form its continuing operation will take or the resourcing implications surrounding it.

“Whilst no tactics guarantee success in the event of Julian Assange leaving the embassy, the MPS will deploy a number of overt and covert tactics to arrest him.”

Such threats should not be underestimated. When Assange was first granted political asylum by Ecuador, the UK threatened to storm the Embassy and seize him, in a display of contempt for international law and a colonial-style disregard for Ecuadorean sovereignty.

WikiLeaks spokesperson Kristinn Hrafnsson said of the MPS move, “My interpretation is that it has not been lifted. They are calling off the uniformed presence but escalating the covert operation and will arrest him if he steps out of the embassy.”

It is almost five years since Assange was first arrested in London under a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) issued by Sweden. From the outset, the manhunt of Assange has been part of a transparent and malicious frame-up. He is not even named as an accused person on the EAW, which states that he is required in Sweden only for questioning.

To this day Assange has never been charged with a single crime by the Swedish authorities, who have refused to interview him in London regarding the allegations made against him.

The persecution of Assange has gone on for so long that in August, Swedish director of public prosecutions Marianne Ny announced that she was “compelled” by August 18 to “discontinue” investigations into three of the allegations of sexual offences made in 2010 against Assange. On that date a five-year statute of limitations on the allegations expired. Ny stressed that her office will continue to seek to charge Assange with the remaining bogus allegation of rape, which can be pursued until 2020.

The Australian government has participated to the hilt in the attempt to railroad Assange. Last week he gave an interview to an Australian radio station in which he denounced the government for denying him and others their basic democratic rights as citizens. He said, “There has been no contact with the Australian consulate for years, and when I do they simply say, ‘What do you want?’”

Despite the relentless pursuit of Assange, WikiLeaks has managed to remain operational. In July, it published a trove of more than a million emails from Italian surveillance malware vendor Hacking Team. These shed further light on the extent of the spying being conducted by governments around the world against their populations.

According to Hacking Team, the software can “attack, infect and monitor target PCs and smart phones, in a stealth way” and “bypass encryption, collect relevant data out of any device, and keep monitoring your targets wherever they are, even outside your monitoring domain.”

Among the 46 countries known to have purchased or who were preparing to buy the Hacking Team software are the United States, Britain and Australia, as well as the Egyptian and Thai military dictatorships.

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