

Julian Assange loses initial bid to overturn British arrest warrant

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A judge in London yesterday rejected an application by WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to withdraw a British arrest warrant issued against him in 2012. In a judgment full of obvious contradictions, she ruled that way even though a Swedish-initiated European arrest warrant—the trigger for the British warrant—was cancelled in May 2017.

Despite the trumped-up Swedish government “sexual assault” allegations against Assange being dropped long ago, he still faces immediate arrest if he steps outside the Ecuadorian embassy, where he has been confined for five and a half years in a tiny, windowless room, 15 feet by 13, without access to sunlight, fresh air or exercise.

Swedish authorities last year formally closed their investigation, effectively confirming that there was never any case to investigate in the first place. What was involved was a “dirty tricks” operation aimed at discrediting and paralysing WikiLeaks and putting Assange behind bars, or worse.

Nevertheless, senior district judge Emma Arbuthnot insisted that Assange must still be arrested by the British police, despite no charges of any kind ever being laid against him—not even for skipping bail itself. She claimed this was a “straightforward reading” of the UK Bail Act. Assange had not been charged with “absconding” from bail, but she ruled that he must be brought to court to possibly face such a charge.

After handing down her ruling, the judge agreed to adjourn the hearing until next Tuesday to consider “public interest” arguments submitted by Assange’s lawyers. Tweeting after the ruling, Assange said: “We only lost the first of four points. I was never charged. My asylum was over US extradition and Sweden dropped its so-called ‘preliminary investigation’ a year ago. We are arguing four points ... If we win any point

the warrant falls.”

Even if Arbuthnot were to withdraw the arrest warrant next week, however, Assange would still face almost certain arrest and extradition to the United States to be tried for espionage and treason, crimes carrying potential death penalties.

A sealed indictment was drawn up under the Obama administration. The Trump administration’s Attorney General Jeff Sessions said last April that Assange’s arrest remains “a priority.” CIA director Mike Pompeo has described WikiLeaks as “a non-state hostile intelligence service.” James Comey, then the FBI director, last May told a US Senate panel Assange would be arrested “as soon as he stepped outside the embassy.”

As these statements underscore, the US political, military and intelligence establishment is determined to punish Assange and silence WikiLeaks for having exposed its war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and its diplomatic intrigues and crimes around the world.

This included the release of the “collateral murder” video showing the 2007 US helicopter massacre of 12 Iraqi civilians, the posting of over 250,000 secret US diplomatic cables, and the ongoing publication of thousands of files detailing the CIA’s “malware” operations to secretly seize control of computer networks.

Outside the court, Assange’s lawyer Jennifer Robinson said whether or not the warrant was quashed, Assange would not leave the embassy until he had an assurance he would not be extradited to the US. “Mr Assange remains willing to answer to British justice in relation to any argument about breaching bail, but not at the expense of facing injustice in America,” she said. “This case is and always has been about the risk of extradition to the United States and that risk remains

real.”

Robinson pointed out that Assange had already suffered far in excess of any penalty for absconding from bail—possibly a fine or a short term in jail—to seek political asylum in the embassy.

In a written submission to the judge, Assange’s barrister Mark Summers QC said Assange had genuine fears, later proved correct, that the US authorities sought to prosecute him over his work with WikiLeaks. If arrested, Summers stated, Assange would face rendition to the US, treatment similar to that meted out against WikiLeaks whistleblower Chelsea Manning and possible “persecution, indefinite solitary confinement and the death penalty.” Manning spent seven years in a military prison and was subjected to abuse amounting to torture.

In her ruling, Judge Arbuthnot made no mention of this reality. Instead she declared that it was essential to uphold the Bail Act to avoid the “administration of justice” being “undermined.” She flatly dismissed the argument that the arrest warrant was “obsolete” because the “substantive proceedings”—the European warrant—was “no longer in existence.”

Assange’s barrister also submitted a medical report about Assange’s deteriorating health. Summers said Assange was in constant pain, regularly suffered respiratory infections and had significant depression. Judge Arbuthnot, however, said the health issues were “not that bad.”

Assange’s lawyers argued his punishment was not “proportionate” and it was in the court’s interest not to proceed with Bail Act charges. They cited the December 2015 UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention report that condemned Assange’s detention as “arbitrary, unreasonable, unnecessary, disproportionate” and called on Swedish and British authorities to immediately end his “deprivation of liberty” and compensate him.

The Westminster Magistrates Court room was packed and protests were conducted outside, demanding Assange’s freedom.

The British government, however, is just as intent on putting Assange away as the US. Before seeking asylum in the embassy, Assange was jailed in Wandsworth Prison in isolation for 10 days and then put under house arrest for 550 days under powers granted by the European warrant. Scotland Yard

mounted a 24/7 police presence outside the Ecuadorian Embassy for three years and remains committed to arresting him. In 2015, the UK government refused an earlier request for Assange to access hospital treatment without the threat of arrest.

In a bid to end the impasse in its embassy, Ecuador recently granted Assange citizenship and tried unsuccessfully to persuade British officials to give him diplomatic status, which might have allowed him to leave Britain even if he was sought by US officials.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was forced to seek Ecuadorian assistance because successive Australian governments have closely collaborated in the US drive to capture him. In 2010, Prime Minister Julia Gillard vilified his actions as illegal and established a taskforce of Australian intelligence and police officers to actively aid US efforts to fabricate criminal charges against Assange and others.

Assange sent a statement to the January 16 webinar **Organizing Resistance to Internet Censorship**, featuring journalist Chris Hedges and WSWS Chairperson David North. Assange warned that the future of humanity depends on the struggle between the “democratization of communication” via the Internet and “usurpation of communication by artificial intelligence,” directed by conglomerates such as Google and Facebook.

In calling for an **International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites**, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International proposed as one of the principles to be fought for: “Demanding the end to the persecution of Julian Assange and [US NSA whistleblower] Edward Snowden and the complete restoration of their personal freedom.”



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