

Protesters denounce silencing of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange

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Protests took place outside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London Thursday, for a second day, at the decision to deprive WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange of communication with the outside world.

Protesters held placards as they chanted, “Assange is not silent, we are his voice!” Others read, “Free Assange!” “USA: Stop Attacks on Whistleblowers and Journalists!” and “Free Press and Free Assange!”

In a reference to the 2016 United Nations ruling stating that Assange is a victim of arbitrary detention from which he must be released—with which the UK government refuses to comply—another read, “UN to UK: Free and Compensate Assange.”

WikiLeaks tweeted of Assange, “He cannot tweet, speak to the press, receive visitors or make telephone calls.”

Deprived of his only remaining liberties, Assange has fewer rights than prisoners. Yet he has never been charged, let alone prosecuted.

Speaking to the media outside the Embassy Thursday, fashion designer Vivienne Westwood said, “Julian Assange is one of the greatest heroes of the world, we are very concerned now that he can’t have visitors. It’s really important that he’s got access to the world by all the exposures he has managed to do.” Assange was “a war hero, he exposed American war crimes,” she added.

The measures imposed by the Embassy on Assange—who is now an Ecuadorean citizen after being naturalised last December—are draconian. Based on information from a WikiLeaks source, RT said, “The embassy reportedly installed electronic jammers to block all radio communications on its premises hours after an individual representing Assange’s interests was informed of ‘strong discomfort and concern that his declarations have caused in Ecuador’s government’...”

So extensive is the blockade that “The jammers cause some disruption for embassy staff, who can no longer use

their mobile phones due to the communication blackout.”

Ecuador has given no time scale as to how long its restrictions on Assange will be in place, stating only that it will meet with his attorneys next week.

Ecuador’s measures are in violation of a 2016 United Nations resolution that “condemns unequivocally measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online.” The UN affirmed “that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one’s choice.”

Stepping up the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder is bound up with the efforts by Britain and the US to silence opposition to their preparations for war. This is made clear by the fact that the justification used for Ecuador’s censorship was the tweets Assange posted on Monday challenging Britain’s accusation that Russia is responsible for the alleged nerve agent poisoning of former double agent and Russian citizen, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter, Yulia, in Salisbury, England.

This is an entirely fabricated charge, for which the British authorities have still to provide any credible evidence. Assange pointed this out in his tweet, which read, “While it is reasonable for [British Prime Minister] Theresa May to view the Russian state as the leading suspect, so far the evidence is circumstantial & the OCPW [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons] has not yet made any independent confirmation, permitting the Kremlin to push the view domestically that Russia is persecuted.”

In an interview with *Sputnik* Thursday, Australian barrister and adviser to Assange, Greg Barns, was asked, “Do you think that it is Assange’s comments on the Skripal case that caused this cut-off?”

Barns replied, “I can only speculate, because there seems to have been some information from Ecuador that

that was the case.”

The British and US authorities are using the Skripal affair to accelerate the campaign against “Moscow meddling”, to justify NATO’s build-up against Russia and, associated with this, a clampdown on social media and internet freedoms.

An essential component of this military escalation is state censorship against political and social opposition. Under the guise of combating “fake news,” websites and social media pages of many groups and individuals are being closed down by states across Europe.

Accompanying this is the strengthening of police state measures. Only days before Ecuador’s act of censorship, the German government, intelligence services and police collaborated with Spanish intelligence operatives to arrest the democratically-elected president of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont. He was arrested in Germany as he was travelling back to Belgium after a visit he had made to Finland for talks with parliamentary deputies.

Puigdemont is detained under the draconian European Arrest Warrant (EAW) system. He potentially faces 30 years in prison for advocating the separation of Catalonia from Spain.

As the WSWS warned at the time, the detention of Assange in 2010 under an EAW established a precedent for the railroading of political opponents on trumped up and bogus allegations. Assange’s arrest—on US instructions—was upheld by the British courts despite no charges being laid against him.

To avoid the kind of treatment meted out to whistleblower Chelsea Manning, Assange—like Edward Snowden—has been forced into exile. The EAW, under which he was initially held, was dropped in May last year after Sweden finally admitted there were no grounds for prosecution, but Assange still faces arrest.

These events mark a serious escalation in the onslaught on free speech and democratic rights. Ecuador complained that Assange’s entirely legitimate and well-founded questioning of the Skripal events and Puigdemont’s arrest “put at risk the good relations [Ecuador] maintains with the United Kingdom, with the other states of the European Union, and with other nations.” On whose instructions it arrived at its decision is unclear.

There is a real and immediate threat that Assange may be handed over to the US for extradition, either by Embassy officials or a British raid.

On Tuesday UK Foreign Office minister Alan Duncan described Assange in parliament as a “miserable little

worm” who should hand himself in to the British authorities. He said, “It is of great regret that Julian Assange remains in the Ecuador embassy. It is of deeper regret that even last night he was tweeting against Her Majesty’s Government for their conduct in replying to the attack in Salisbury.”

Within hours of this provocative statement, Assange had his communications severed. In response, Assange tweeted, “As a political prisoner detained without charge for 8 years, in violation of 2 UN rulings, I suppose I must be ‘miserable’; yet nothing wrong with being a ‘little’ person although I’m rather tall; and better a ‘worm’, a healthy creature that invigorates the soil, than a snake.”

In 2010, US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks revealed that Duncan was the focus of particular interest by US intelligence. It disclosed a 22 January 2010 cable, signed off by Elizabeth Pitterle, the US head of intelligence operations, stating that analysts were preparing “finished products on the Conservative leadership for senior policymakers” and speculating on the “political ambitions” of the former oil trader—then international development minister.

On Wednesday, May launched the UK’s National Security Capability Review. The review is based on a “Fusion Doctrine”, mobilising all elements of the state and private sector against the threats to the UK. Foremost among these is what the document refers to as “The resurgence of state-based threats” and “Hostile State Activity.”

Russia is explicitly targeted for military action on its borders, diplomatic isolation and measures to clamp down on alleged interference in UK politics through the dissemination of supposed “fake news.” The very day this justification for the new “Fusion Doctrine” was advanced, Assange was silenced.



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