

Ecuador in talks to remove Julian Assange from London embassy

Mike Head
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Under conditions of a growing international campaign to demand freedom for Julian Assange, Ecuador's foreign minister has indicated moves are underway to force the WikiLeaks editor out of Ecuador's London embassy, where he was granted political asylum six years ago.

Ecuador is negotiating an "exit" plan with authorities in Britain, Foreign Minister Jose Valencia said on Wednesday. Valencia told the Associated Press the plan would be "one that encourages an exit, that we do not want to be traumatic... we do not want it to be an exit that may cause dissonance with international law."

Valencia's appointment as foreign minister on June 11 was praised by right-wing media outlets in Ecuador. While saying he wants to avoid anything "traumatic" and illegal under the international law of political asylum, he has moved quickly to meet their demands to resolve the Assange "problem."

According to the *telesur* news site, Valencia's recommendations are due to be presented to President Lenín Moreno, who will make the final decision on how to proceed. Moreno, who branded Assange a "stone" in his shoe, has sought to forge closer relations with Washington since taking office in May 2017.

Whatever these backroom machinations involve exactly, Assange is in great danger. WikiLeaks has continued to publish devastating leaks of material exposing US-led war crimes, mass surveillance, coup plots and regime-change operations around the world.

If Assange is pushed out of the embassy he could be immediately arrested by the British authorities and subjected to lengthy imprisonment, pending extradition to the US, where he could face the death penalty on espionage and conspiracy charges.

Leading figures in the Trump administration, including Attorney-General Jeff Sessions and Secretary

of State Mike Pompeo, have publicly declared their intent to get their hands on Assange. Sessions last year described putting Assange on trial as a US "priority" and Pompeo branded WikiLeaks a "non-state hostile intelligence service."

The US threats against Assange escalated from March 2017, when WikiLeaks began publishing a massive leak of CIA documents. The "Vault 7" files reveal that the CIA is hacking into the phones, PCs, servers, smart televisions and vehicle computer systems of millions of people in the US and internationally.

The closed-door "negotiations" reportedly being conducted on Assange's fate make it all the more imperative for the working class, all young people and principled defenders of democratic rights to come to his defence.

This Sunday, June 17, in order to take forward the fight for such a mass movement, the Socialist Equality Party in Australia is holding a rally in Sydney, together with well-known journalist and filmmaker John Pilger. It will demand that the Australian government intervene to secure the immediate and unconditional freedom of Assange, an Australian journalist and citizen.

Assange must be free to leave the embassy and, if he chooses, to return to Australia, with guaranteed protection against extradition to the US.

Vigils are also being held in cities around the world next Tuesday, June 19, to demand freedom for Assange. The vigils will mark the sixth anniversary of the day on which he sought asylum from Ecuador in order to avoid being extradited to Sweden on trumped-up sexual assault allegations, and then being handed over to Washington.

Swedish authorities finally dropped their "investigation" into the complaints against Assange in

May 2017, thus cancelling the European arrest warrant they issued against him. However, Prime Minister Theresa May's British government still refused to cancel its own arrest warrant against him, nominally for absconding on bail when he sought asylum.

By every indication, the Trump administration is applying intense pressure on Ecuador to hand over Assange. On March 28 this year, Ecuador's government deprived him of any form of communication with the outside world, including visitors, adding to the stress and injustice of being confined to a tiny room for six years, unable to even obtain medical treatment.

Ecuador's decision came just one day after it welcomed a delegation from the US military's Southern Command, headed by General Joseph DiSalvo, to discuss strengthening "security cooperation."

Then on June 4, US Vice President Mike Pence held a meeting with Moreno in the US. Pence said the purpose was to "reinvigorate the bilateral relationship between the United States and Ecuador."

To reinforce Washington's message, and its broader drive to reassert hegemony over Latin America, Pence's office announced yesterday that he will visit Ecuador, as well as Brazil and Guatemala, during the last week of June.

Since Moreno took office he has carried out a sharp turn to the right, imposing tax cuts for big business, cutting social spending and moving to reduce Ecuador's dependence on loans and investment from China in favour of "reinvigorated" relations with US imperialism.

Last month, Ecuador's then Foreign Minister María Fernanda Espinosa reported that moves were underway to reach a "definite agreement" on Assange. She said her government and Britain "have the intention and the interest that this be resolved."

Earlier this month, Espinosa declared that her government would continue blocking Assange from all communications and personal visitors. A day later, she was elected United Nations General Assembly president, evidently with the tacit backing of the Trump administration. Moreno then appointed Valencia, a US-educated diplomat, to replace her.

Last week, two Australian consular officials met with Assange inside the Ecuadorian embassy. It was the first

visit in the six years since he has been effectively imprisoned inside the embassy.

The Australian government is also under mounting pressure from Washington to place itself on the frontline of the US confrontation with China, including by rapidly pushing bills through parliament to outlaw alleged Chinese "foreign interference" in Australia. A leading government committee chairman, Andrew Hastie, last week said the laws were needed to stop Assange-style releases of government secrets "for public consumption."

The conspiracy against Assange is also connected to an intensifying campaign by the US and other governments to impose far-reaching Internet censorship. Unsubstantiated allegations of "fake news" and "Russian meddling" are being used by Google, Facebook and other conglomerates to restrict access to websites—including WikiLeaks and the *World Socialist Web Site*—that provide critical commentary and exposures of the capitalist class and its agencies.

Assange's fate cannot be left in the hands of capitalist governments. We urge workers and young people everywhere to demand his immediate freedom, as a critical part of the fight to defend basic democratic rights. We encourage all readers to join the demonstration in Sydney this Sunday and the vigils and protests being held internationally in defence of Assange.



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