

Leading US House Democrat demands that Ecuador's president "hand over" Julian Assange

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The US is increasing its pressure on Ecuador to evict WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from its London embassy, where he took political asylum in June 2012. He would then be arrested immediately by British police and subjected to extradition proceedings to face trumped-up espionage charges in the US that could see him jailed for life or even executed.

On Wednesday, the top-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Relations Committee sent a threatening letter to Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno insisting that he "hand over" Assange to the "proper authorities" as a precondition for improving relations with the United States.

In a bipartisan letter, Eliot Engel, a New York Democrat, and former Foreign Relations Committee Chairwoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican, declared: "We are very concerned with Julian Assange's continued presence at your embassy in London and his receipt of Ecuadorian citizenship last year."

Engel's role makes even more explicit the leading part being played by the Democrats in the drive to lock away Assange for good and silence WikiLeaks itself. In June, on the eve of a visit to Ecuador by Vice President Mike Pence, 10 Democratic Party senators called on the Trump administration to demand that the Ecuadorian government renege on the political asylum it provided Assange six years ago.

Written in bullying and contemptuous language, the Engel-Ros-Lehtinen letter warns that any further "significant progress" and "warming" in Washington's relationship with Moreno's government on a "wide range of issues," including "economic cooperation" and financial aid, depends on Ecuador terminating Assange's political asylum.

The letter effectively confirms that if Assange is forced to leave the embassy, on whatever pretext, the British government will deliver him into the hands of the US. Prime Minister Theresa May's government has repeatedly refused to give Assange an assurance he will not be extradited to the

US.

"On numerous occasions, Mr. Assange has compromised the national security of the United States," the letter states. "He has done so by publicly releasing classified government documents along with confidential materials from individuals connected to our country's 2016 presidential election."

The thousands of secret US files published by WikiLeaks document US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, anti-democratic plots and interventions around the world, and massive global surveillance and computer hacking by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies.

The letter also refers to the unsubstantiated conspiracy theory concocted by the US spy agencies and the Democrats to accuse WikiLeaks of aiding Russian "interference" to secure Donald Trump's 2016 victory. In reality, WikiLeaks published documents, which it insists were not provided by Russia, proving that top Democratic Party officials sought to sabotage the campaign of Bernie Sanders in the primary elections and that Hillary Clinton gave speeches to Wall Street bankers pledging to protect their interests.

The letter brands Assange "a dangerous criminal and a threat to global security," who "should be brought to justice." The truth is that Assange and WikiLeaks have courageously continued to publish leaked documents that expose the truly "dangerous criminals"—the US ruling class and its allies, and their illegal invasions, assassinations, regime-change operations and mass surveillance.

As for "justice," the American intelligence, detention and judicial agencies have a documented record of torture, frame-ups, show trials and incarceration of "enemy combatants" without trial.

The letter adds: "Most recently, we were particularly disturbed to learn that your government restored Mr. Assange's access to the Internet." This is also a false assertion.

Last Friday, under the guise of partially restoring

Assange's right to access the internet and receive visitors, Moreno's government sought to impose a new "special protocol" that provides a pretext for terminating the asylum that the previous Ecuadorian government of Rafael Correa granted him in 2012.

Anyone seeking to visit Assange would have to give the Ecuadorian embassy three days' notice and wait for written authorisation by the head of the embassy, which could be arbitrarily refused or cancelled without any reason being given. Visitors would have to provide the Ecuadorian authorities with full ID details and either hand over or clear all mobile phones and other communications devices.

Assange, whose health has been severely compromised by being trapped inside the tiny embassy for six years, would have to submit to compulsory quarterly medical evaluations that could provide the pretext for a forced "medical evacuation."

Far from restoring Assange's basic democratic rights, the protocol would reinforce the political silencing imposed by Ecuador in March. In direct violation of the right to asylum, it seeks to forbid him from making any comments that criticise or could offend any government, particularly those with "good relations" with Ecuador.

Assange would have to "comply scrupulously" with a "prohibition" on carrying out any "activities that could be considered as political and interference in the internal affairs of other States, or that may cause harm to the good relations of Ecuador with any other State."

The protocol states that failure to comply with any of its obligations "will entail, in addition to other possible consequences, the termination of the asylum of Mr. Julian Assange."

One of the possible grounds for a US application to extradite Assange may well be an indictment against the WikiLeaks editor by the Mueller investigation into purported "Russian interference" in the 2016 presidential election. A concerted effort has been waged by US intelligence agencies, the Democratic Party and media outlets such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* to slander Assange as an agent of both the Putin regime and the Trump campaign because WikiLeaks published the damning exposures of Clinton.

In what may be related to the attempt to link WikiLeaks with Russia, Moreno's government this week released documents purporting to reveal that it sought to get Assange out of its embassy last December by naming him as a political counsellor to the country's embassy in Moscow.

British authorities, however, flatly rejected a request for Assange to be given an Ecuadorian diplomatic ID card. According to the documents, a letter dated December 21, 2017 from Britain's Foreign Office said UK officials "do

not consider Mr. Julian Assange to be an acceptable member of the mission."

Russia's embassy said on Twitter that the material was "another example of disinformation and fake news." The embassy repeated its denial of similar reports produced by the *Guardian* last month. WikiLeaks associate and former British whistle-blower Craig Murray has also publicly rejected claims that Assange wanted or requested to go to Russia.

The files were made public on Tuesday at the instigation of right-wing opposition legislator Paola Vintimilla, whose Social Christian Party opposed the former Correa government's decision to grant Assange nationality. Assange, an Australian citizen, was compelled to turn to Ecuador in 2012 because the Labor Party-led government in Australia fully lined up with the Obama administration and denied him his right to assistance and protection against persecution.

Under Moreno, who assumed the presidency in May 2017, Ecuador's government has turned against WikiLeaks and Assange as part of its efforts to reforge relations with Washington. The decision to cut off his communication and visitation rights on March 28 this year was taken one day after the US and Ecuador held top level military talks. Moreno has since repeatedly threatened to repudiate Assange's political asylum in an apparent effort to pressure him into "voluntarily" leaving the embassy.

As the conspiracy against the WikiLeaks editor escalates, the *World Socialist Web Site* reiterates its call for all defenders of democratic rights to fight for the unconditional freedom of Julian Assange. It is an essential component of the broader struggle in defence of freedom of speech and an independent and critical media in opposition to the growing censorship of oppositional views by governments and corporate giants such as Facebook and Google.



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