

Julian Assange issues “urgent” legal challenge against US extradition plans

Mike Head**24 January 2019**

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whose web site is continuing to expose war crimes, coup plots and mass surveillance by Washington and its allies, has made a new legal bid to block a concerted operation to extradite him to the US, where he could be imprisoned for life, or even sentenced to death.

Under intense pressure from the Trump administration, Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno has for months ramped up efforts to repudiate the political asylum that Ecuador gave Assange in 2012 to protect him from US extradition, and force or coerce him to leave its London embassy.

Assange's legal team yesterday announced an “urgent” application to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACtHR), based in Washington, to direct the Trump administration to unseal the charges it has secretly filed against Assange. The application also asks the IACtHR to compel Ecuador to cease its intensive spying activities against Assange, stop the isolation imposed on him inside the embassy since last March and protect him from US extradition.

The lawyers' media statement said the 1,172-page application seeks “precautionary measures” from the IACtHR, “which monitors compliance of the US and Ecuador with their binding legal obligations.” The IACtHR, an organ of the Organization of American States (OAS), is meant to promote and protect human rights in the American hemisphere, but the Trump administration has boycotted its hearings.

The US government has refused to reveal details of the charges against Assange, despite sources in the US Department of Justice confirming to the Associated Press that Assange has been charged under seal. “The revelation that the US has initiated a prosecution against Mr. Assange has shocked the international community,” the legal submission states. The US government “is required to provide information as to the criminal charges ... in

full.”

The submission reveals that US prosecutors have in the past few months formally approached people in the US, Germany and Iceland and pressed them to testify against Assange in return for immunity from prosecution. Those approached are associated with WikiLeaks' joint publications with other media about US diplomatic interventions, torture and indefinite detention at America's Guantanamo Bay prison camp and war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The statement notes: “The joint publication effort between WikiLeaks, *The New York Times*, McClatchy, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, the UK's Channel 4, *Al Jazeera*, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, *El País*, *The Hindu*, and Reuters, among others, won numerous journalistic awards and created the collaborative model subsequently used for other large disclosures such as the Panama Papers.”

Many of these media organisations have since turned on Assange, propagating US intelligence-fed slanders against him and WikiLeaks—ranging from false accusations of sexual misconduct to involvement in a supposed conspiracy between Donald Trump and Russian authorities to steal the US presidency from the Democratic Party candidate, Hillary Clinton, in 2016.

The statement warns that the operation against Assange sets a precedent to be used against other media outlets. It states: “The [Trump] administration has been plagued by leaks of classified information in its first two years, and is clearly intent on using the prosecution of Julian Assange as an ‘icebreaker’ to set a dangerous precedent that would enable the prosecution of most serious media organisations, such as *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, AP, CNN and NBC which routinely obtain and publish information from classified sources.”

The application by Assange's lawyers “identifies a raft of legal obligations that the US and Ecuador are flouting

in their treatment of Mr. Assange.” Former Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzón, the international coordinator of Assange’s legal team, said the violations undermine the right to asylum from “political persecution.”

The media statement points to the real motives behind the drive to silence Assange and WikiLeaks—their ongoing publication of incriminating documents exposing US-led global spying and internet hacking operations.

“The lawyers document Trump administration attempts to pressure Ecuador to hand over Assange, notably recent serious overt threats against Ecuador made by senior US political figures, unlike the more veiled threats made in the past. These threats have significantly increased since WikiLeaks published the ‘Vault 7’ documents from the CIA—the largest leak of CIA classified information in history, which the US government claims were provided by a young CIA officer, Joshua Schulte.”

The statement reports that “specialized security services contracted by Ecuador” have spied on Assange and his visitors, “acting as an informant to the US authorities, specifically the FBI.” This followed the 2017 declaration by CIA director Mike Pompeo, now the secretary of state, that WikiLeaks is a “non-state hostile intelligence service.”

The application denounces Ecuador’s interference with his access to his lawyers, affecting his right to a legal defence. It demands the suspension of Ecuador’s “so-called special protocol” that blocks Assange’s communications with the outside world and a guarantee that his “rights as an asylee will be respected in full.”

The statement notes that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention last month urged all states to implement its 2016 call to set Assange free, adding: “It is time that Mr. Assange, who has already paid a high price for peacefully exercising his rights to freedom of opinion, expression and information, and to promote the right to truth in the public interest, recovers his freedom.”

The escalating threat to Assange was underscored by a report yesterday in the *Guardian* that “if he were to walk out on to the street, Assange is likely to face contempt of court charges for fleeing British justice.” This points to the British government plotting to detain Assange for months while US extradition proceedings are conducted. Previously, the only British charge against Assange was said be a relatively minor offence of skipping bail.

American prosecutors have investigated Assange since at least 2010, when a grand jury hearing was opened under the Obama administration into WikiLeaks’ publication of hundreds of thousands of US diplomatic

cables. Special prosecutor Robert Mueller’s probe of alleged “Russian interference” in the 2016 US election has intensified these operations, under the cover of investigating WikiLeaks’ publication of documents that exposed aspects of Clinton’s Wall Street-backed campaign.

Earlier this month, with Ecuador’s agreement, US investigators began questioning former London embassy diplomatic staff about Assange’s visitors. The US Department of Justice issued international subpoenas, supposedly probing a thoroughly discredited *Guardian* report that Trump’s former 2016 campaign chairman Paul Manafort held secret talks in the embassy with Assange.

Ecuadorian President Moreno recently launched a pseudo-legal “special examination” of Assange’s asylum and Ecuadorian citizenship to provide a cover for his government to repudiate its protection obligations. His government has increasingly aligned itself with the Trump administration, to which it has desperately appealed for support for an International Monetary Fund bailout because of Ecuador’s deepening debts, which have been fuelled by falling global oil prices and the rapacious dictates of the financial markets.

These developments underline the importance of demonstrations called by the Socialist Equality Party in Sydney and Melbourne in March as part of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s international campaign for the defence of Assange and internet freedom. Assange remains an Australian citizen. The SEP will fight to mobilise the working class around the demand that the Australian government use its diplomatic powers to secure his safe passage to Australia, if he so chooses, with an unconditional guarantee against extradition to the US.



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