

US journalist exposes Julian Assange's prison-like conditions

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29 March 2019

Cassandra Fairbanks, a US online journalist, has published an account of a visit she made to Julian Assange on Monday, which confirms that the WikiLeaks publisher is being politically gagged and subjected to conditions in Ecuador's London embassy that resemble those of a maximum-security prisoner.

Yesterday marked one year since Ecuadorian authorities severed Assange's internet access, curtailed his right to receive visitors and banned him from making any political statements, including about his own plight.

The Ecuadorian government, which previously granted Assange political asylum in 2012, has come under intensifying pressure from the US and its allies to force the WikiLeaks founder out of the embassy. Assange would face immediate arrest by British police on trumped-up bail charges, and the prospect of extradition to the US, on manufactured espionage and conspiracy charges that carry maximum sentences of life imprisonment or the death penalty.

Washington has escalated its pursuit of Assange in recent weeks. On March 8, Chelsea Manning was arrested, and jailed indefinitely, for refusing to testify at a closed-door Grand Jury hearing aimed at concocting the charges against Assange.

Manning, who in 2010 courageously leaked US army war logs and diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks exposing Washington's war crimes and global diplomatic intrigues, was imprisoned for seven years under the Obama administration. Now she has been held in solitary confinement for the past three weeks.

Fairbanks' article demonstrates that Assange and Manning, whose plight as political prisoners is inextricably linked, are being subjected to similarly punitive conditions.

Fairbanks said it was the third time she had visited Assange over the past year, and "each time the atmosphere seems progressively worse." She wrote:

"When I visited for the first time, which I believe was a year ago to the day, the atmosphere was far more welcoming. The staff and ambassador that were there during my first visit have since been replaced."

Visitors now are not allowed to keep their phones when they meet with Assange. If they bring a phone to the building, they are compelled to hand it over to Ecuadorian authorities, and provide detailed data, including its serial number and make. Fairbanks said she had been "advised that Ecuador could not be trusted to hold my phone."

Fairbanks said she was searched after entering the embassy, and directed to a conference room "where two large visible cameras were pointed at the table." Assange appeared at the room's door, but was not allowed to enter.

Embassy staff demanded that he submit to an apparently unprecedented full-body metal detector scan before meeting Fairbanks. It appears that this was intended to prevent Assange from bringing any device into the room, such as a radio, which could be used to prevent his conversation from being recorded and monitored by embassy officials.

According to Fairbanks, Assange protested, declaring: "I don't want to do the body scan. It is undignified and not appropriate. I am just trying to have a private meeting with a journalist."

Embassy staff shut the door to the conference room. Assange's lawyers were compelled to undergo a full-body scan before entering and apprising Fairbanks of the situation.

When they left, the door to the conference room was shut. Fairbanks later attempted to leave the room, only to discover that she had been locked in. She was effectively detained for an hour. During that time, Fairbanks said she heard Assange opposing the actions of the embassy staff.

Fairbanks was subsequently released from the room and ushered to the lobby. She said she overheard Assange ask:

“Is this a prison? This is how you treat a prisoner, not a political refugee!” The Ecuadorian ambassador, Jaime Alberto Marchán, allegedly responded that the measures were “for our protection and to protect you!”

Fairbanks then recounted the following exchange: “‘You have been illegally surveilling me,’ Assange sternly insists. ‘I want you to shut up,’ the ambassador says. ‘I know you want me to shut up—the Ecuadorian president has already gagged me,’ Assange fired back. ‘I am banned from producing journalism.’”

Assange later declared: “You have been working with the US government against me, it’s disgraceful! You are an agent of the US government, and there will be consequences for your illegal acts.”

Ecuadorian embassy staff effectively scuttled the meeting between Assange and Fairbanks. They were able only to briefly greet each other in the building’s lobby.

Following the publication of Fairbanks’ article on Tuesday on the right-wing *Gateway Pundit* website, the official WikiLeaks Twitter account issued a post stating that Assange’s legal team had “confirmed each factual element” of her account.

Kristinn Hrafnsson, who was appointed as WikiLeaks editor-in-chief last October, following the Ecuadorian government’s silencing of Assange, tweeted: “The treatment of Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy is unacceptable. It is despicable that a nation’s government turns against a man it has granted diplomatic asylum in such a way that he has less rights than a prisoner.”

The conditions documented by Fairbanks appear to have become even more onerous than those outlined by well-known journalist John Pilger earlier this month at a Socialist Equality Party rally in Sydney called to defend Assange and demand his immediate freedom.

Pilger, who had last visited the WikiLeaks founder on December 31, likened the conditions in the embassy to Room 101 in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. The Australian journalist had been compelled to communicate with Assange by passing notes and whispering to avoid the surveillance measures in the room.

The hostile conditions imposed upon Assange are a further warning of plans to force him out of the embassy and into the hands of the US and British authorities, who represent the governments whose crimes and mass surveillance he has done so much to expose.

WikiLeaks drew attention last week to the fact that a US Department of Justice aircraft, previously used in rendition operations, had flown to London, only to return on Saturday. The dispatch of the plane was accompanied

by an increase in the number of plainclothes police officers around the Ecuadorian embassy.

Yesterday, Ecuador Foreign Minister Jose Valencia, who has close ties to US authorities, pledged “firm and sustained” measures against Assange, because the WikiLeaks Twitter account, which Assange does not control, Tweeted media reports about a corruption scandal involving Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno and his brother. According to WikiLeaks, Ecuadorian state media also suggested “Assange should be arrested” over the coverage of the scandal.

The latest developments underscore the urgency of extending the campaign in defence of Assange and Manning, including by participating in rallies being held across the United States by the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

Assange’s defiant statements, as reported by Fairbanks, demonstrate that, as Pilger declared at the Sydney rally, the WikiLeaks founder “will never obey Big Brother.”

The brutal treatment of Assange and Manning is an indictment of successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, which have participated in the US-led vendetta against Assange, an Australian citizen. It is also a damning exposure of those organisations, such as the trade unions, the Greens and the pseudo-left, that once claimed to defend the WikiLeaks founder but have since abandoned him.

The demand advanced by the SEP rallies in Sydney and Melbourne this month, for the Australian government to take immediate action to secure Assange’s release and safe passage to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US, must be raised by all defenders of democratic rights. It will be a central feature of the SEP’s campaign in the upcoming Australian federal election.



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