

UN official visits Julian Assange, investigating Ecuador's illegal surveillance

Mike Head
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The United Nations special rapporteur on the right to privacy, Joe Cannataci, was finally permitted yesterday to meet with Julian Assange inside London's Belmarsh prison.

The WikiLeaks journalist and publisher has been held virtually incommunicado, in denial of his fundamental legal and democratic rights, since the British police dragged him out of Ecuador's embassy more than two weeks ago.

This has become a global battle for free speech and the right of the public to know the truth about the crimes being committed by governments and their state agencies around the world.

Assange is being persecuted, and subjected to an unprecedented legal assault, for publishing millions of secret documents exposing political conspiracies and corporate crimes. Without this extraordinary record of authentic investigative journalism since 2006, this information would have remained suppressed.

Confronted by worldwide protests and petitions against the illegal termination of Assange's political asylum and the immediate launching of proceedings to extradite Assange to the US, the British government felt compelled to grant the UN access. Cannataci became the first person allowed into Belmarsh prison to visit Assange, who has even been denied his right to speak to his family.

For weeks, the UN has been investigating the blanket surveillance conducted by Ecuador's government against Assange inside its embassy.

On April 10, WikiLeaks revealed that hundreds of thousands of documents, audio recordings, videos and photos were taken in the embassy. Assange was arrested the very next day, preventing a scheduled April 25 visit by Cannataci.

Ecuadorian officials spied on every aspect of

Assange's life for more than a year, including his medical consultations and confidential meetings with his lawyers. The obvious purpose of this illegal operation was to gather or concoct evidence that the Trump administration could use to indict and extradite Assange on manufactured conspiracy and espionage charges.

Outside the prison yesterday, Cannataci told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "There are strong indications that some elements of his privacy may have been breached." He added: "The case is important because it concerns a very special set of circumstances where a person who is not formally under detention yet was subjected to surveillance."

Having met with Assange for two hours, the UN special envoy reported that Assange was "in fairly good shape and certainly very cogent in replying to our questions." This is another indication of Assange's defiant determination to fight his removal to the US, despite the damage done to his health by his seven-year confinement inside the Ecuadorian embassy.

Interviewed by the Italian newspaper *Repubblica*, Cannataci pointed to the far-reaching nature of the spying. He said he was seeking access to the material currently held by the Spanish police, who are investigating an attempt to extort WikiLeaks for copies of the documents and videos.

"If and when my access is granted, that evidence might consist of thousands of hours of surveillance footage, which will take some time to watch."

The UN rapporteur agreed with the *Repubblica* journalist, Stefania Maurizi, that the spying operation against Assange threatened an entire range of human rights, including lawyer-client confidentiality. "[T]here are many dimensions to the case, including freedom of expression, including whistleblowing, protection of

journalistic sources,” he said.

The UN is investigating whether Ecuador violated Assange’s privacy under two cornerstones of international law—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights—by placing him under strict surveillance.

Jennifer Robinson, a lawyer representing Assange, an Australian citizen, said in a statement that his legal team welcomed the UN’s continued engagement in the case. “It is a matter of grave concern that Ecuador expelled Mr Assange from the embassy before the scheduled UN visit could take place,” she said.

Robinson said the legal team had also requested a visit to Assange by the UN special rapporteur on torture. She recalled that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had ruled in late 2015 that Assange was “arbitrarily detained,” as a result of having to remain in the embassy to protect himself from US extradition, and called for his release.

Chelsea Manning, the courageous whistleblower who leaked the infamous “Collateral Murder” video and many thousands of incriminating US diplomatic cables to WikiLeaks, has been held in solitary confinement for over six weeks because she has refused to give perjured testimony against Assange before a Grand Jury. Her continued detention is a transparent attempt to force her to cooperate in the US-led vendetta against Assange.

If Assange is dispatched to the US on bogus computer hacking charges, he will soon face additional charges, carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or the death penalty. This would set an international precedent for the jailing of journalists everywhere who expose government crimes and wrongdoing.

Since Assange’s arrest, numerous corporate publications have lined up directly behind this offensive. They have brazenly used Ecuador’s video footage and other illegal surveillance material to repeat the personal smears against Assange fabricated by the corrupt Ecuadorian regime to justify its termination of his political asylum.

These lies and slanders against Assange are in contrast to the immense support that he enjoys among the millions of workers, students and young people internationally who regard him and Manning as heroes. The mass opposition to Assange’s persecution must be

transformed into a political movement to prevent his extradition and secure his freedom. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties (SEP) around the world are playing a central role in this decisive fight.

Over the past 18 months, the SEP (Australia) has held a series of rallies, demanding that the Australian government immediately fulfil its obligations to Assange, as an Australian citizen, by securing his return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

Another rally, aimed at placing this demand at the centre of the May 18 Australian federal election, will be held in Sydney this Saturday, followed by meetings in a number of cities.

The SEP in the UK has taken part in protests and vigils calling for an all-out mobilisation against the moves to extradite Assange. It will participate in a London public meeting, called by the Julian Assange Defence Committee, today.

This crucial struggle is entirely bound up with the fight for genuine socialism. As the all-out assault on Assange and Manning by governments and the corporate media conglomerates demonstrates, securing fundamental democratic rights requires nothing less than the worldwide transformation of society by the working class to meet social needs, not the profit interests of the financial aristocracy.

This internationalist and socialist perspective animates the 2019 International Online May Day Rally, organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the World Socialist Web Site. We urge our readers to register today.

The author also recommends:

WikiLeaks exposes spying operation against Assange in Ecuador’s London embassy

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