

# On the spot report: Ecuador's government colludes with Washington to seize Julian Assange's possessions

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Ecuadorian officials carried out an illegal search of the personal possessions of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at the country's embassy in London yesterday. A statement posted online confirmed the search had taken place at the request of the United States for "judicial assistance" in its efforts to extradite Assange.

The search took place 40 days after Assange was seized by a police snatch squad and dragged out of the embassy despite being granted asylum in 2012. He was forced to leave behind all his possessions, including personal, legal and medical documents, as well as electronic devices. Assange is locked up in Belmarsh maximum security prison, after being sadistically sentenced to 50 weeks' imprisonment on May 1 for a minor bail violation dating back nearly seven years.

Supporters of Assange began gathering by 8 a.m. yesterday outside the embassy to witness and denounce the search and seizure.

Members of the Julian Assange Defence Committee and the Socialist Equality Party were among those who gathered, after reports the operation would begin at 9 a.m. *El Pais* wrote, "The search of Assange's sealed-off room will take place on May 20 as part of a petition for judicial assistance issued by the US Department of Justice to the government of Ecuador." It would be mounted "under the oversight of police chief Diego López and second sergeant Milton Jaque," described as a "computer forensic expert."

During the day, Metropolitan Police officers, including several SO6 Diplomatic Protection police, positioned themselves near the embassy and at one point approached the building's front entrance. SO6 is an armed police unit. Police officers refused to answer questions from protesters, except to say that they were "keeping the peace."

At around 10 a.m., a marked police car pulled up opposite the Embassy before driving off. Later, a Met police van arrived and parked adjacent to the embassy's side entrance, before a number of officers marched to the front of the Embassy building. Assange supporters demanded to know what they were doing and chanted, "Shame on you!," "Gangsters!," "Julian Assange is innocent!," and "This is theft, stop the crime!"

Ecuador's surrender of Assange's personal possessions is an act of truly staggering criminality.

WikiLeaks has reported that Assange's entire legal defence against US extradition was left in the embassy. In a press statement issued early yesterday morning, WikiLeaks noted the timing of the search and seizure, just three weeks before the June 14 deadline for the US to file its final extradition request to the UK. Assange's persecutors arrived to ransack his possessions with representatives of his legal team and even a United Nations official barred from being present.

"The chain of custody has already been broken," WikiLeaks stressed, meaning that evidence could have been tampered with and should not be admissible in court.

"The material includes two of his manuscripts, as well as his legal papers, medical records and electronic equipment. The seizure of his belongings violates laws that protect medical and legal confidentiality and press protections."

"Earlier this week the UN Special Rapporteur on Privacy, who met with Mr. Assange in Belmarsh prison on 25 April, asked to be present to monitor Ecuador's seizure of Assange's property. Ecuador inexplicably refused the request. ..."

To underscore the high-level efforts to railroad Assange into a US prison, the press release noted that on Friday, "[Ecuadorian] President Lenin Moreno initiated a state of

emergency that suspends the rights of prisoners to ‘inviolability of correspondence, freedom of association and assembly and freedom of information’ through Executive Decree 741.”

“The Trump administration is inducing its allies to behave like it’s the Wild West,” Kristinn Hrafnsson, editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, said.

“Ecuador is run by criminals and liars. There is no doubt in my mind that Ecuador, either independently or at the behest of the US, has tampered with the belongings it will send to the United States.”

Baltasar Garzon, international legal coordinator for the defence of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, added that Assange’s documents were being “handed over to the agent of political persecution against him, the United States. It is an unprecedented attack on the rights of the defence, freedom of expression and access to information exposing massive human rights abuses and corruption.”

Another of Assange’s lawyers, Aitor Martinez, said, “Ecuador is committing a flagrant violation of the most basic norms of the institution of asylum by handing over all the asylee’s personal belongings indiscriminately to the country that he was being protected from—the United States.”

In a further act of persecution, on the morning of the raid, Sweden’s deputy director of public prosecution, Eva-Marie Persson, asked a Swedish local district court for a detention order for Assange “in his absence, on probable cause suspected for rape.”

To this day, Assange has never been charged with any crime relating to fabricated allegations of sexual misconduct dating back to a 2010 trip he made to Sweden. Even now, there is no mention of charges being brought. If the detention order is granted, however, this would be the first step in issuing a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) for Assange to be surrendered to Sweden.

Persson stressed that she saw no reason why Sweden’s move would conflict with the US extradition request, as the “UK authorities will decide on the order of priority.”

Politically, the Swedish prosecutors action served to divert attention from the criminal conspiracy carried out yesterday by Ecuador, the US and the UK. But former British ambassador and human rights advocate Craig Murray made important observations about the legal considerations behind Persson’s request.

He noted that an EAW “must be issued from one country to another by a judicial authority.” However, the original Swedish request for Assange’s extradition “was not issued by any court, but simply by the prosecutor.”

“Assange’s initial appeal up to the UK Supreme Court was in large part based on the fact that the warrant did not come from a judge but from a prosecutor, and that was not a judicial authority.”

Murray went on, “I have no doubt that, if any other person in the UK had been the accused, the British courts would not have accepted the warrant from a prosecutor. ... My contention is borne out by the fact that, immediately after Assange lost his case [in May 2012] against the warrant in the Supreme Court, the British government changed the law to specify that future warrants must be from a judge and not a prosecutor.”

In what Murray describes as “a completely unprecedented and frankly incredible piece of reasoning...Lord [Nicholas] Phillips concluded that in the English text of the EAW treaty ‘judicial authority’ could **not** include the Swedish prosecutor, but that in the French version ‘autorité judiciaire’ could include the Swedish prosecutor. The two texts having equal validity, Lord Phillips decided to prefer the French language text over the English language text, an absolutely stunning decision as the UK negotiators could be presumed to have been working from the English text, as could UK ministers and parliament when they ratified the decision.” [emphasis in original]

In other words, when it comes to the fate of Julian Assange, the highest legal authorities are simply changing the law and making it up as they go along.

To add to the picture of official criminality, Assange’s lawyer Per Samuelsson told Reuters that no court proceedings should go ahead in Sweden because the UK is refusing to grant Assange’s lawyers access to their client in Belmarsh.

“Since he is in prison in England, it has so far not been possible even to speak to him by telephone,” Samuelsson said. He would tell the Swedish District Court it could not investigate the prosecutor’s request until he had conferred with his client and learned whether he wished to oppose a detention order.



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