

Amnesty International declares Julian Assange “not a prisoner of conscience”

Laura Tiernan
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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a multi-award-winning investigative journalist and publisher, is locked up in HM Prison Belmarsh in London in solitary confinement. US extradition proceedings have begun. If extradited, he will face charges under the Espionage Act for publishing information that exposed US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The charges being prepared by the US Department of Justice carry the death penalty.

Chelsea Manning, who courageously blew the whistle on US atrocities by giving information to WikiLeaks, endured seven years of torture in a military prison and was jailed again last week for refusing to testify against Assange.

But according to Amnesty International (AI), neither Assange nor Manning are “prisoners of conscience” and their defence is not being actively pursued by the human rights charity.

In a letter to the Julian Assange Defence Committee (JADC) on May 17, Amnesty International UK declared, “Julian Assange’s case is a case we’re monitoring closely but not actively working on. Amnesty International does not consider Julian Assange to be a Prisoner of Conscience.”

AI’s curtly worded letter followed an urgent appeal by Maxine Walker on behalf of the JADC. Her letter drew attention to multiple human rights violations against Assange. “We cannot state strongly enough that Julian Assange is in great peril”, she wrote.

Walker cited AI’s April 11 statement that “Assange should not be extradited or subjected to any other transfer to the USA, where there are concerns that he would face a real risk of serious human rights violations due to his work with Wikileaks.”

Since then, Walker challenged, “no further statements appear to have been made by you... His name appears not to have been mentioned in your material for World Press Freedom Day, an extraordinary omission given his current situation and that Julian Assange was awarded the 2009 Amnesty International UK Media Award for New Media.”

Her letter continued: “The UK government has ignored, indeed poured scorn, on the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention 2015 ruling that ‘the deprivation of liberty of Mr. Assange is arbitrary and in contravention of articles 9 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’.”

The UN Working Group, Walker pointed out, had described Assange’s imprisonment in Belmarsh as having “furthered the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Mr. Assange.” They judged his 50-week sentence in a supermax prison had “contravened the principles of necessity and proportionality envisaged by the human rights standards.”

Walker’s letter concluded, “It is urgent that organisations concerned with human rights should become more vocal and active on this case. One statement is not adequate to deal with the threats to Julian Assange and the wider implications for free speech, freedom of information and the protection of journalists.”

AI’s two-paragraph reply was received by Walker three days later. It linked to a statement by AI’s Deputy Director for Research for Europe,

Massimo Moratti, published on May 13, supporting Sweden’s reopening of “preliminary investigations” into fabricated “rape” allegations against Assange. Headlined, “Julian Assange rape allegations must be treated with utmost seriousness,” Moretti declared, “It is vital that the allegations against Julian Assange are properly investigated in a way that respects the rights of both the complainant and the person under investigation.”

This is a travesty.

For nearly nine years, bogus “rape” and “sexual molestation” allegations against Assange have been wielded by Sweden and Britain to smear the WikiLeaks founder and secure his extradition to the US. Assange was always willing to travel to Sweden to answer the allegations against him, but Swedish authorities refused to guarantee against his onward extradition under fast-track “temporary surrender” arrangements in place with the US. It was the threat of US extradition which forced Assange to seek political asylum in Ecuador.

Assange has already been questioned by Swedish police and prosecutors—in August 2010 in Stockholm and at Ecuador’s embassy in London in November 2016. On both occasions, the preliminary investigation was closed with not a single charge laid. Under Swedish law, Assange can be charged *prior* to an extradition request. Yet even now, Sweden has submitted no charges and is seeking a European Arrest Warrant for blatantly political objectives.

AI deliberately conceals the political context of Assange and Manning’s incarceration: international geopolitics, illegal wars of occupation, regime change, assassination threats by US politicians against Assange—none of this exists. Having pointed to Sweden, AI simply states that it does not regard the world’s most persecuted journalist a Prisoner of Conscience. It believes he, “should not be extradited to the USA, where he faces a real risk of serious human rights violations... due to his work with Wikileaks.” It’s just that they are not “actively” pursuing the case.

AI seizes on the Swedish allegations as a pretext to wash its hands of Assange, but what of Manning? The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted AI on Tuesday to ask why it had also refused to list Manning as a Prisoner of Conscience. AI’s UK press officer contacted their US office before explaining via email that “detention for not testifying before a grand jury is not itself illegal.” And neither is chopping off heads in Saudi Arabia, which has not prevented AI from actively campaigning on that issue.

AI hastened to tell the WWSW that “we understand Chelsea’s motivations for declining [to testify] when she has already testified at length on these issues,” adding that the “excessive sentencing and cruel treatment of her previous incarceration served as a stark reminder of the lengths that those in power will go to in order to keep others from speaking out.”

Yet they have not posted a single statement on Manning since 2017.

AI defines a Prisoner of Conscience as “someone who has not used or advocated violence but is imprisoned because of who they are (sexual orientation, ethnic, national or social origin, language, birth, colour, sex or economic status) or what they believe (religious, political or other

conscientiously held beliefs).”

Assange and Manning have been thrown in prison because of their “conscientiously held beliefs” that all people have the right to know about war crimes, state corruption, mass surveillance and antidemocratic intrigues by the world’s most powerful states. “I can either go to jail or betray my principles,” Manning has explained. “I would rather starve to death than change my opinion.”

If Assange and Manning are not prisoners of conscience, then who is?

AI told the WSWS they do not maintain an international list of POC designates. But a partial list published on Wikipedia shows the majority come from Russia, Iran, China, the former Soviet republics and Saudi Arabia. Just one POC is listed in the United States, none from Britain and none from France where journalists are presently being threatened with jail for exposing French military involvement in the ongoing war in Yemen that has claimed over 100,000 lives.

On its website, AI states, “We protect people, defending their right to freedom, to truth, and to dignity. We do this by investigating and exposing abuses where they happen.” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) “remains fundamental to Amnesty’s work.” “It provides the bedrock of most of our campaigning, and it helps us to hold authorities to account when rights are abused.”

When it comes to Assange and Manning, AI holds no authority to account, remains silent in the face of outrageous human rights violations and helps to magnify the government-media smear machine. Virtually all of the UDHR’s thirty articles have been breached by the US, UK, Australia, Sweden and Ecuador in their treatment of Assange and Manning.

The most egregious violations of Assange’s rights relate to the following principles: Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person; Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile; Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him; Article 14: Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; Article 15: No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality; Article 17: No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property; Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Written in 1948, the preamble to the UDHR states that “it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.” Emerging from the blood and filth of fascism and a World War that claimed 60 million lives, the imperialist powers erected an international framework of economic, political and legal mechanisms to guard against a new descent into war, social upheaval and revolution.

If the framers of the UDHR sought insurance against recourse to “rebellion”, this aim was shared by those who established Amnesty International. Its founder, barrister Peter Benenson, wrote in 1960, “The important thing is to mobilise public opinion quickly and widely, before a government is caught up in the vicious spiral caused by its own repression and is faced with impending civil war.” It was also important to choose POCs carefully: “The technique of publicising the personal stories of a number of prisoners of contrasting politics is a new one. It has been adopted to avoid the fate of previous amnesty campaigns, which so often have become more concerned with publicising the political views of the imprisoned than with humanitarian purposes.”

The unstated premise—clear in AI’s silence on Manning and Chelsea—is that the “political views” of these two prisoners should not be publicised

and the institutions of western capitalist “democracy” must be defended, especially from any popular and revolutionary threat from below. Eight years ago, Amnesty International hailed WikiLeaks and the *Guardian* for their role in publishing documents that played a “catalytic role” in sparking the 2011 Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia. Today, the *Guardian* is the Witchfinder General, gruesomely smearing Assange as a Russian stooge and “rapist”, while AI has thrown Assange and Manning to the wolves.

A political chasm has opened. In Britain, all of the establishment parties—Labour, Liberal Democrats, Greens, Scottish National Party—along with the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party are ranged against Assange, with a host of NGOs and human rights groups in tow. The Swedish allegations merely serve as a convenient pretext for their naked defence of imperialism. Sweden is the “Pontius Pilate option” for those like Dianne Abbott and Jeremy Corbyn, who declared to the media on April 13 that “there can be no hiding place from those kind of accusations” and that Assange should be sent to Sweden if an extradition request is received.

Lest anyone doubt the role of Sweden’s re-re-revived “preliminary investigations”, consider the words of Heather Barr, Acting Co-Director of the Women’s Rights Division at Human Rights Watch UK, who issued a statement on April 16 that should be entered onto a rollof of shame: “When WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange was arrested in London last week so he could face charges in the US, it raised deep concerns around media freedom. Amid these concerns, however, let’s remember that Assange is also accused of rape.”

Barr’s statement effectively overrode HRW’s earlier condemnation of Assange’s arrest at the Ecuadorian embassy, endorsing his lengthy incarceration in Belmarsh Prison (“UK, Deciding Assange’s Fate, Should Give Sweden Time to Evaluate Rape Case”) while making false and defamatory statements against Assange. Barr makes repeated reference to rape “charges” against Assange—charges that have never existed!

The political line-up on Assange confirms the central contention of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*: Assange and Manning’s freedom rests on the independent political mobilisation of the working class. It is to the great mass of working people, youth and all genuine defenders of democratic rights that the fight to free Assange and Manning must be taken.

Appendix: An exchange of letters

The following is an exchange of letters between the Julian Assange Defence Committee’s Maxine Walker and Amnesty International UK.

Julian Assange Defence Committee

14 May 2019

Dear Amnesty International UK

I am writing to you on behalf of the Julian Assange Defence Committee, which was set up to oppose his extradition to the USA and to galvanise opposition to it.

We cannot state strongly enough that Julian Assange is in great peril. Indeed you may have seen the interview with WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson following his and Pamela Anderson’s recent visit to Belmarsh in which Mr Hrafnsson states, ‘It is a question of life and death, that’s how serious it is.’

We are aware that you made a statement after his arrest in April in which you said:

“Amnesty International believes that Julian Assange should not be extradited or subjected to any other transfer to the USA, where there are concerns that he would face a real risk of serious human rights violations due to his work with Wikileaks.”

You recognised in this statement the potential violations of his human rights should such an extradition take place including the ultimate violation, that of his right to life.

However, we also note that no further statements appear to have been made by you since then. His name appears not to have been mentioned in your material for World Press Freedom Day, an extraordinary omission given his current situation and that Julian Assange was awarded the 2009 Amnesty International UK Media Award for New Media. Julian Assange has won many such awards in recognition of WikiLeaks' pivotal role in exposing US and UK war crimes and violations of human rights that have taken place in those wars including torture, murder and inflicting large numbers of civilian casualties.

The UK government has ignored, indeed poured scorn, on the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention 2015 ruling that *"the deprivation of liberty of Mr. Assange is arbitrary and in contravention of articles 9 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights"*. After Julian Assange's arrest in April, the Working Group also stated, 'The Working Group regrets that the Government has not complied with its Opinion and has now furthered the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Mr. Assange.' It expresses concern that Mr. Assange has been detained since 11 April 2019 in Belmarsh prison, a high-security prison, as if he were convicted for a serious criminal offence. *"This treatment appears to contravene the principles of necessity and proportionality envisaged by the human rights standards."*

It is urgent that organisations concerned with human rights should become more vocal and active on this case. One statement is not adequate to deal with the threats to Julian Assange and the wider implications for free speech, freedom of information and the protection of journalists. We would ask you: to prioritise this case in your publicity and campaigns; to lobby MPs who should be raising concerns about this case and his prison conditions (and are not doing so); to encourage your supporters to write to him in prison.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes

Maxine Walker

Dear Maxine,

Thank you for your email regarding Julian Assange.

Our latest statement, following the re-opening of the Swedish Prosecution Authority's investigation into a rape allegation against Julian Assange, can be found here; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/julian-assange-rape-allegations-must-be-treated-with-utmost-seriousness/>

Julian Assange's case is a case we're monitoring closely but not actively working on. Amnesty International does not consider Julian Assange to be a Prisoner of Conscience. AI does, however, continue to believe that he should not be extradited to the USA, where he faces a real risk of serious human rights violations, including in relation to the likely conditions of his detention, due to his work with Wikileaks.

We hope this explains our position.

Kind regards,

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To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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