

US issues formal request for Assange's extradition

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The *Washington Post* reported today that officials from the US Justice Department issued a formal request to British authorities last Thursday for the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. The document has not been made public.

The US government had 60 days from Assange's arrest by British police on April 11 to deliver a complete extradition application to the UK. The first substantive hearing over the US extradition bid is due to be held in London on June 14.

The newspaper report confirms that the US administration of President Donald Trump is pressing ahead with its attempts to prosecute Assange on 18 charges, including 17 counts of violating the Espionage Act, despite widespread opposition from workers, students, young people and civil liberties advocates within the US and internationally.

The charges against Assange, over his role in the exposure of US war crimes and diplomatic conspiracies, are a frontal assault on the press freedom rights enshrined in the first amendment of the US constitution.

No US administration has previously sought to prosecute a journalist and publisher under the Espionage Act, a draconian piece of legislation historically used to target anti-war activists, alleged spies and government whistleblowers.

Under existing British and US laws, individuals who are extradited from the UK to the US cannot be charged with additional crimes other than those included in the formal extradition request, or that were allegedly committed after the application had been issued.

According to the *Washington Post*, the Justice Department will not charge Assange over WikiLeaks 2017 publication of a trove of documents from the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) dubbed "Vault 7."

"According to government officials," it stated, that decision was taken "out of concern that doing so would do more damage to national security."

WikiLeaks has repeatedly explained that the stepped-up US pursuit of Assange stemmed from the release of "Vault 7." Its publication prompted then CIA director Mike Pompeo to denounce Assange in April 2017 as a "demon" and WikiLeaks as a "hostile non-state intelligence agency."

US officials immediately stepped up their campaign to pressure the Ecuadorian authorities to rescind Assange's asylum and evict him from the embassy. They also initiated the FBI investigation that culminated in the Espionage Act charges.

"Vault 7" exposed the CIA's development of offensive hacking capabilities and its deployment of malicious computer viruses. Documents demonstrated that the agency had developed the ability to hack into computer systems and leave "tell-tale signs," so as to attribute the attacks to adversaries such as Russia, China and Iran.

Other material indicated that the CIA had the capability to intrude into household items, such as smart televisions, potentially enabling it to conduct mass surveillance. Some documents showed the agency was seeking to develop the ability to hack into the computer systems of modern cars—a tool that could be used in an assassination program.

Despite the restriction on additional charges against Assange, other than those contained in the formal extradition request, there are indications that US investigations against him are ongoing.

Chelsea Manning, the courageous whistleblower who leaked material to WikiLeaks in 2010, remains imprisoned by the Trump administration. She had been held without charge, in a bid to force her to give

perjured testimony against Assange before a Grand Jury convened to investigate WikiLeaks.

Last Friday, WikiLeaks warned that the US was also seeking to revive an attempt by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) to frame Assange for “computer hacking” in Iceland in 2011.

The media organisation reported that Icelandic FBI informant Sigurdur Thordarson, who has previously been convicted of fraud and embezzlement, had travelled to Washington DC late last month to answer questions, potentially leading to additional concocted charges against Assange. Thordarson was also interviewed in Iceland in early May by the FBI team that has led the investigation into Assange.

The formal US extradition request coincides with reports that Assange’s health is deteriorating. On May 30, WikiLeaks issued a statement confirming that Assange had been transferred to the medical wing of Belmarsh Prison, amid “grave concerns” about his “state of health.”

The following day, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, who visited Assange in early May, issued a statement warning that the WikiLeaks founder “showed all symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture.”

Melzer condemned the persecution of Assange by the US, British, Swedish and Ecuadorian governments. He warned that the British courts had undermined Assange’s rights to due process and that the WikiLeaks founder faced the danger of being exposed to further torture and other human rights violations if he is extradited to the US.

The UN report and Assange’s health crisis have intensified opposition to the US attempts to extradite him.

On Friday, the Mexican Press Club issued a statement calling for joint action in defence of Assange. Its secretary general, Celeste Saenz de Miera, declared: “We need to act together to show our capacity to act. If we drop Assange, we drop ourselves. This should not happen.”

The statement followed international developments, demonstrating that the attacks on Assange have opened the floodgates for a broad offensive against press freedom.

Last week, the Australian Federal Police raided the home of a News Corp journalist, and the Sydney

offices of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, over articles exposing war crimes in Afghanistan and government surveillance plans. The French government is moving to prosecute journalists for exposing its complicit in Saudi Arabia’s war against Yemen.

Speaking to KPFA radio today, Australian investigative journalist John Pilger said that these actions vindicated Assange’s warnings that “so-called liberal democracies were changing,” and increasingly adopting the methods of “autocracies.” Pilger called for the broadest mobilisation in defence of Assange.

Rallies in Britain and elsewhere are being held this week. Today, the Socialist Equality Party announced a series of demonstrations in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane to demand that the Australian government fulfil its obligations to Assange as a citizen and journalist by securing his release from Britain and return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.



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