

WikiLeaks publisher Assange faces US extradition trial next February

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Chief judge Emma Arbuthnot ruled Friday that WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange will face a trial in February 25 next year to determine whether he is extradited to the United States.

As far as Britain's government and judiciary are concerned, the verdict is a forgone conclusion. Assange will be railroaded to Washington, where his persecutors will try him on 18 counts, including 17 under the Espionage Act, carrying a combined sentence of 175 years in prison.

Westminster Magistrates Court was able to proceed after Conservative Home Secretary and party leadership contender Sajid Javid certified the US extradition request on Wednesday. This was just 24 hours after the Trump administration formally asked the British government to extradite Assange.

Looking visibly unwell, Assange appeared at court via video link. He initially had difficulty even telling the judge his name and date of birth. Assange was not able to appear even by video link at his last scheduled hearing, as he had been transferred to Belmarsh prison's medical ward due to a marked decline in his health.

The WikiLeaks founder was appearing before the court despite not being able to even see the extradition request filed against him by the US.

After hearing prosecutor Ben Brandon, for the US, and a statement from Assange's legal team, Arbuthnot ordered a full extradition hearing, expected to last five days, to begin on February 25. The entire hearing lasted less than half an hour.

Arbuthnot had no right to preside over the hearing as her impartiality has been questioned. She is the wife of ex-Conservative MP, junior defence minister and government whip Baron James Arbuthnot. He was chair of Parliament's Defence Select Committee in

2005-2014 and a director of Security Intelligence Consultancy SC Strategy Ltd. Two other directors of the private consultancy are Sir John Scarlett, the former head of Britain's foreign intelligence service, MI6, and Lord Carlile.

A cross-party peer, Carlile was a former "independent" reviewer of UK government antiterrorism legislation, who has repeatedly defended the extraordinary scope of the antidemocratic powers of the UK intelligence agencies. In 2015, he called for an end to the "demonisation" of the intelligence agencies. SC Strategy was formed in 2012 and by 2015 Scarlett and Carlile had received £800,000 between them for offering commercial advice on UK policy and regulation.

In February last year, when Assange was still in the Ecuadorian embassy, Arbuthnot upheld a UK arrest warrant and threw out irrefutable arguments from Assange's legal team explaining why he had been forced to breach bail conditions in 2012. Assange sought political refuge at the embassy, which he was granted under international law, because he feared that he would be extradited to the US on trumped-up espionage charges. No one who is not part of a conspiracy to silence Assange can now deny that his fears were well founded.

Brandon laid out the reasons why the US is seeking to lock Assange away forever. The case "is related to one of the largest compromises of confidential information in the history of the United States," he declared.

What Assange had in fact done was expose the war crimes of US imperialism to the world's population.

Brandon continued that Assange had "published on the internet, via WikiLeaks, Afghanistan war-related significant activity reports, Iraq war-related significant activity reports and US State Department cables

containing names of human intelligence sources who provided information for the United States and coalition forces and to United States diplomats.”

WikiLeaks had “damaged the work of the security and intelligence services of the United States of America. It damaged the ability of the armed forces of the United States of America to carry out their tasks and endangered the interests of the United States of America abroad.”

Brandon also accused Assange of seeking to crack a US defence network password, in collusion with US whistleblower Chelsea Manning. This is a key element of the US plan to extradite Assange, as it brands Assange as a “hacker,” rather than as a publisher and journalist. Invoking the Espionage Act against those who publish or report leaked information is an unprecedented attack on the First Amendment of the US constitution, protecting freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Assange’s defence lawyer, Mark Summers QC, said to Arbuthnot that the case being concocted against Assange was an “an outrageous and full-frontal assault on journalistic rights.” The defence faced substantial obstacles in mounting its case as Assange was in prison, had no access to a computer and could only see legal documents if they were posted to him. Summers said the US timetable for a trial in February was therefore “optimistic.”

After Arbuthnot had waved through the demands of the US, without bothering to address any of the difficulties raised by Summers, Assange demanded clarity on the nature of the accusations against him. Protesting the deliberations, he said that he had not yet been able to see the paperwork containing the US case against him. He was immediately interrupted by Arbuthnot who said, “they only received it yesterday... in any event.”

Assange said, “I heard this gentleman who represents the United States say something and yesterday I was told that the BBC was reporting that I was wanted for computer hacking in the United States. My understanding is that this is false. The US government does not allege that WikiLeaks hacked anything... I understand there has been quite a lot of false reportage.”

He asked if it was possible for the court to clarify that he or WikiLeaks did not hack anything. Brandon

replied that one of the counts against him was for alleged “computer intrusion” and that this would equate to hacking under UK law.

Taking her cue from the prosecution, Arbuthnot dismissed all legal concerns, saying, “My understanding now is that there is a hacking allegation.” She then told Assange, “I think the problem is that we are all working on the basis of papers that were delivered yesterday and that they are quite substantial and no one, let alone your representatives,” has got “fully on top of them.”

Assange replied defiantly that “175 years of my life is effectively at stake and there has been significant mis-reportage.”

“I didn’t break any password whatsoever,” he insisted. “WikiLeaks is nothing but a publisher.”

Arbuthnot refused to allow any further discussion on Assange’s important statements. She closed the hearing by saying to Assange cynically, “No doubt the press will report accurately what has been said today. I’m sure they will, and in due course you will be able to see the allegations for yourself.”

Outside the court, Jennifer Robinson from Assange’s legal team said that the US indictment, if successful, would have “a chilling impact” on journalism and publishers “all over the world.” Assange was being pursued in retaliation for him making public “truthful information about the United States,” including “evidence of war crimes, human rights abuse and corruption the world over.”



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