

US, Sweden and Britain dismiss UN finding that they tortured Assange

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UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer last weekend publicly released detailed letters he sent to the governments of the United States, Britain, Sweden and Ecuador in May, documenting their responsibility for the “psychological torture” inflicted upon WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange as a result of a decade-long political persecution.

Melzer also posted the replies he received from the US and Swedish governments, bluntly dismissing his findings. His letters to Britain and Ecuador went unanswered.

The official responses are the latest demonstration of the illegal character of the campaign against Assange. Fundamental precepts of international law are being trampled on in the attempt to extradite him from Britain to the US, where he faces the prospect of life imprisonment, or even execution, for exposing US war crimes, mass surveillance and diplomatic conspiracies.

Melzer’s letters were sent in late May, following his visits with Assange at Britain’s Belmarsh Prison on May 9 and 10. They were dispatched shortly before the public release of a summary of his findings that Assange had been subjected to unprecedented “public mobbing” and vilification, along with a denial of his fundamental legal and human rights.

In his letters, Melzer noted that he was accompanied to Belmarsh by Professor Duarte Nuno Vieira, an expert in medical forensics, and Dr. Pau Pérez-Sales, a well-known psychiatrist. Both specialise in identifying and documenting the medical effects of torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.

Melzer pointed to the legal travesties that have been perpetrated against Assange since he was snatched from Ecuador’s London embassy by British police on April 11. The WikiLeaks founder was immediately convicted of a bail violation and sentenced to 50 weeks in a maximum-security prison, despite the minor character of the offense. The sentence, along with the summary character of the proceedings, Melzer indicated, violated Assange’s legal rights.

The UN official also expressed concern that, in prison, the “security regime applied to Mr. Assange, including the limited frequency and duration of lawyers’ visits and the lack of access to a computer (even without internet), severely hampers his ability to adequately prepare for the multiple and complex legal

proceedings that are pending against him.”

Melzer referred to a series of physical issues suffered by Assange as a result of his eight-year confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy without access to sunlight. “From a psychological perspective, Mr. Assange showed all symptoms typical for prolonged and sustained exposure to severe psychological stress, anxiety and related mental and emotional suffering in an environment highly conducive to major depressive and post-traumatic stress disorders,” he said.

The letters stated that Assange’s rapid weight loss during his incarceration, and his transfer to the prison’s medical wing shortly after Melzer’s visit, confirmed the WikiLeaks founder’s “continued exposure to progressively severe psychological suffering and the ongoing exacerbation of his pre-existing trauma.”

Melzer identified a direct causal relationship between Assange’s psychological afflictions and the political persecution to which he has been subjected.

He particularly highlighted the impact of the WikiLeaks founder’s “prolonged arbitrary confinement by the United Kingdom and Sweden.” Melzer noted that Assange had fully cooperated with the Swedish investigation into supposed allegations of sexual misconduct in 2010.

The UN official stated that there was “compelling evidence” that British and Swedish prosecutors had worked together to render Assange “unable to travel to Sweden for additional questioning, and to comply with British bail conditions,” by not ruling out extradition to the US.

Under a second subheading, titled “Public shaming and judicial harassment by Sweden,” Melzer wrote: “For almost nine years, the Swedish authorities have consistently maintained, revived and fueled the ‘rape’-suspect narrative against Mr. Assange, despite the legal requirement of anonymity, despite the mandatory presumption of innocence, despite the objectively unrealistic prospect of a conviction, and despite contradicting evidence suggesting that, in reality, the complainants never intended to report a sexual offence...”

He cited the text messages of one of the “victims,” which stated she had been “railroaded” into making criminal allegations against Assange by the police.

Melzer also reviewed the role of the Ecuadorian government

of Lenín Moreno, which, beginning in 2017, had subjected Assange to “excessive regulation, restriction and surveillance,” along with harassment, and the “public dissemination” of “half-truths, defamations and deliberately debasing statements.” He condemned the termination of Assange’s political asylum, which was carried out “without any form of due process.”

The UN official finally outlined a campaign of “sustained and unrestrained public mobbing, intimidation and defamation” against Assange. Melzer said the authorities “in the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden and Ecuador” had “either acquiesced in, consented to, instigated, or even initiated” a torrent of public abuse targeting Assange.

Those denigrating, ridiculing and even inciting violence against the WikiLeaks founder included, not only prominent “private individuals” and the corporate media, but also “current or former political figures and senior officials of various branches of government, including judicial magistrates personally involved in proceedings against Mr. Assange.”

Melzer concluded each of the letters with a warning that if extradited to the US, Assange would face the prospect of “torture,” “psychological ill-treatment,” a denial of his right to due process and other forms of “cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment.”

The UN rapporteur also noted that “the broad description of facts in the US extradition request might subsequently be used as a basis for adding even more serious charges, as appears to be permissible under the current UK/US extradition treaty, potentially carrying the death penalty or a life sentence without parole, both of which would constitute absolute barriers to refoulement under human rights law.”

Melzer issued recommendations in each of the letters, including that Assange is in “urgent need of treatment by a psychiatrist of his own choice and confidence, whom he does not associate with the detaining authorities.”

The distinguished law professor’s recommendations were either dismissed or ignored.

The US response brazenly declared that Assange had never been “arbitrarily detained,” but had instead “voluntarily stayed in the Embassy.” This was a flagrant rejection of repeated findings by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which upheld Assange’s status as a political refugee.

The US government also rejected Melzer’s definition of “public mobbing” as a form of “psychological torture,” instead presenting it as a form of “free speech.” In reality, senior officials from the Obama and Trump administrations have publicly denounced Assange as a “high-tech terrorist,” and have called for him to be denied fundamental rights enshrined in the US Constitution. Democratic and Republican politicians have advocated the WikiLeaks founder’s assassination, in violation of domestic and international law.

In its response to Melzer, the Swedish government absurdly presented itself as a neutral bystander that did not interfere in

the activities of the public prosecutors. In fact, Assange’s case has been political from the outset, involving interventions by senior Swedish politicians and correspondence between Swedish authorities and their counterparts in Britain and the US, much of which remains classified.

Commenting on their refusal to provide a guarantee against Assange’s onward extradition to the US if he were sent to Sweden, the government stated that it “finds it important to emphasise that, to date, no request for extradition regarding Mr. Assange has been directed to Sweden.”

Significantly, the Swedish reply effectively signalled that it would consider such a request if it were forthcoming, further confirming Assange’s warnings that attempts to extradite him to Sweden were aimed at establishing an alternative route for his dispatch to the US, while serving to blacken his name.

The contemptuous rejection of Melzer’s findings by all the states involved in the persecution of Assange is of a piece with a broader turn to authoritarianism, as well as imperialist wars and interventions carried out without any regard for international law.

The responses further demonstrate that Assange’s freedom will not be secured by issuing appeals to the governments that are seeking to silence him. As the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International have explained, what is required is the mobilisation of the immense social and political power of the international working class, to prevent Assange’s extradition and secure his liberty.

All defenders of democratic rights should join the Global Defence Committee, established by the WSWs and the ICFI, to take this crucial struggle forward.



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