

CIA spied on Assange's lawyers, visitors in Ecuadorian embassy

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A report published by the Spanish daily *El País* on Wednesday detailed pervasive spying on WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, along with his lawyers, doctors and visitors in Ecuador's London embassy, between 2015 and March 2018.

The surveillance by UC Global, a Spanish firm contracted by the Ecuadorian government to manage security at the embassy, was allegedly conducted at the request of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which had unfettered access to the confidential material that was gathered.

The report is the latest demonstration of the flagrant illegality of the protracted vendetta against Assange by the US government and its allies in Britain and Australia. It is further proof that the WikiLeaks' publisher has no prospect of a fair trial if he is extradited from Britain to the US, where the Trump administration is seeking to prosecute him for exposing American war crimes and global diplomatic intrigues.

El País revealed late last month that UC Global director David Morales was under investigation by Spanish prosecutors, over allegations by Assange's lawyers that the former military contractor had overseen a massive breach of his privacy, including violations of his right to attorney-client privilege.

According to the initial reports, Morales first made contact with US intelligence officers in 2015. It is alleged that he rapidly agreed to provide them with surveillance gathered at the embassy. This came to include UC Global furnishing the CIA with direct access to live audio and video feeds of virtually every area of the embassy, including the women's toilet where Assange sometimes met with his lawyers in a bid to have private conversations.

UC Global operatives placed hidden cameras and recording devices in fire extinguishers and items of the interior decor, such as picture frames.

Wednesday *País* *reported* *that* the CIA also spied extensively on all of Assange's visitors. They included US journalists and lawyers. This indicates that the spying operation involved not only breaches of international law, but also violations of protections against warrantless surveillance of US citizens contained in the American Constitution.

As part of security protocols at the embassy, visitors were required to turn over their bags, computers and all electronic devices at the entrance. According to *El País* some visitors had been designated as "priority targets" by Morales. He told staff to notify him before their arrival at the embassy.

The belongings of the "priority targets" were subjected to especially intrusive examinations. *El País* stated that after their visit UC Global staff would prepare "a report for each of them with the date of the meeting, a copy of their passport, the content of the conversation and a video of the meeting." This was then uploaded to a secure file sharing network, to which the CIA, and possibly the US Federal Bureau of Investigations had access.

On some occasions, *El País* reported, staff would open the casing of a "priority target's" cellphone "in order to locate and photograph its International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number, a unique code that identifies a device and is one of the most valuable pieces of information for anyone looking to hack a phone." The CIA has a widely-documented record of phone and computer hacking.

In one instance, UC Global staff apparently tried to steal the phone battery of Ellen Nakashima, a *Washington Post* reporter who visited Assange in late 2017. *El País* cites a UC Global report, which stated: "I took her phone, her recorder, I took out the battery, I tried to keep it, but the woman remembered it at the exit."

UC Global's "priority targets" reportedly included Assange's lawyers and doctors, along with any visiting

journalists and American supporters. Individuals named by *El País* who were subjected to the surveillance include famous actress Pamela Anderson, veteran US reporter Lowell Bergman and well-known investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald.

The Spanish paper wrote: “The spying on the American visitors is explained by the interest in finding out who was supporting the cause of the man who uncovered the most secret military actions by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. The distribution of that confidential information has prompted the US justice system to have Assange extradited from the United Kingdom, and he is facing charges that carry a total of 175 years in jail.”

In other words, the surveillance was part of the US government’s bid to destroy WikiLeaks. The central role of illegal spying in the attempted US prosecution of Assange renders it unconstitutional and in flagrant violation of due process.

El País revealed that Morales, who functioned as a point man for the US government, was arrested by Spanish police in August, and is potentially facing prosecution for UC Global’s activities at the embassy.

In comments to *Shadowproof* after the revelations, Greenwald stated: “What *El País* has reported constitutes an illegal and unconstitutional search of my property by the U.S. government. I am talking to lawyers about possible recourse, but this spying operation is very grave.”

While the surveillance of Assange appears to have begun in 2015, it was dramatically escalated in 2017. That corresponds with WikiLeaks’ publication of “Vault 7,” a vast tranche of CIA documents exposing the agency’s mass surveillance program, and its use of malicious computer viruses to hack phones and other electronic devices.

The CIA response was apoplectic, with its then director Mike Pompeo branding Assange as a “demon” and declaring that WikiLeaks was a “hostile non-state intelligence service” without any First Amendment protections. The same month that WikiLeaks began publishing “Vault 7,” in February 2017, the FBI opened the investigation that culminated in the issuing of 18 charges against Assange, including 17 under the Espionage Act.

Ecuadorian authorities are also implicated in the surveillance. In 2016, the government of Rafael Correa, which had granted Assange asylum in 2012, cut-off his internet for several weeks at the behest of US authorities.

In 2017, President Lenin Moreno came to power. He

deepened Correa’s turn to US imperialism and increased his own government’s surveillance of Assange. It is inconceivable that Morales’ activities were unknown to embassy officials and Ecuador’s intelligence agency Senain, which also heavily monitored Assange.

Moreno, after coming under intense pressure from the US, cut off Assange’s communications in March 2018, and prepared the grounds for his expulsion from the embassy.

The precise timing of the revocation of asylum, on April 11, appears to have been aimed at stymying the exposure of the illegal surveillance of Assange. Weeks earlier, WikiLeaks lawyers had filled a complaint with the UN Special Rapporteur on Privacy, alleging that Assange’s right to privacy had been violated within the embassy. He was due to visit Assange in late April.

Less than 24 hours before Assange was expelled from the embassy, WikiLeaks held a press conference, documenting the pervasive surveillance within the building. Photos and videos of Assange, apparently collected by UC Global, had come into the possession of Spanish criminals, who had sought to extort money from WikiLeaks in exchange for the material.

The Associated Press reported in April that Moreno gave the final decision to cancel Assange’s asylum on April 9, apparently after learning that the press conference was to be held the following day.

Other governments may also be implicated. In an interview this week, Assange’s father John Shipton pointedly noted that both Britain and Australia are members of the US-led Five Eyes spying network, which collaborates in mass surveillance and involves the sharing of sensitive intelligence between the participating countries.



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