

Doctors demand “urgent” medical intervention to save Julian Assange’s life

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More than 65 eminent medical doctors from the UK and around the world have issued an open letter calling for urgent action to protect the life of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange.

The doctors warn there may be serious consequences if Assange is not moved from Belmarsh Prison to a university teaching hospital where he can be assessed and treated by an expert medical team.

“Were such urgent assessment and treatment not to take place,” they write, “we have real concerns, on the evidence currently available, that Mr Assange could die in prison. The medical situation is thereby urgent. There is no time to lose.”

Their letter is addressed to UK Home Secretary Priti Patel and has been copied to Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott.

The doctors’ extraordinary intervention in the midst of the British general election coincides with a groundswell of popular opposition to the relentless state persecution of Assange. The Australian-born journalist faces extradition to the United States and a 175-year prison term for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dr Stephen Frost, a specialist in diagnostic radiology, began drafting the open letter with colleagues in late October. He was moved to act after reading the harrowing account of Assange’s October 21 court appearance at London’s Westminster Magistrates Court written by former British diplomat and whistleblower Craig Murray.

“I was shocked,” Frost recalled. “As a doctor, I suddenly realised that things were a lot worse than I had previously thought and that I needed to do something.”

Signatories have backed the findings on Assange by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer. Melzer visited Assange at Belmarsh Prison with two medical experts on May 9. His team found Assange was suffering the effects of prolonged “psychological torture” after nearly a decade of arbitrary detention and state persecution.

On November 1, Melzer warned, “Mr. Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end

up costing his life.”

Frost said Melzer’s intervention had been critical. “He did his job fearlessly and he was disregarded. But he was an expert in his field and we respected his opinion. You can tell when someone is speaking the truth.”

Senior medical doctors in the UK, and from Sweden, the US, Australia, Germany, Italy and Sri Lanka have signed the open letter. They include leading psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, neurologists, surgeons and general practitioners.

“Medical doctors have a professional duty to report suspected torture of which they become aware, wherever it may be occurring,” the signatories write. “That professional duty is absolute and must be carried out regardless of risk to reporting doctors.”

The letter presents a timeline of deteriorating health for Assange inside the Ecuadorian embassy, with the UK government repeatedly denying him access to hospital treatment. In December 2015, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that “Mr Assange’s health could have deteriorated to such a level that anything more than a superficial illness would put his health at a serious risk.”

The letter’s medical timeline ends with Assange’s current downward spiral inside Belmarsh. Signatories report their “serious concerns” about Assange’s fitness to stand trial in February 2020. Week-long US extradition hearings are due to start on February 24, with Assange still confined to Belmarsh Prison’s “health ward”—described by prisoners as the “hell ward.”

An addendum to the open letter cites a “climate of fear and intimidation surrounding the provision of medical care to Mr Assange.” It reports a psychological expert who complained of “difficulties in finding medical practitioners who were willing to examine Mr Assange” due to their fear of government reprisal. The signatories conclude, “That all this has been played out in the heart of London for many years is a source of great sadness and shame to many of us.”

With their open letter, doctors in the UK and

internationally are refusing to be silenced. They have honoured their professional obligation and taken a courageous stand to protect the life of Julian Assange.

As Dr Frost told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Sometimes in medicine, as in other spheres of life, extraordinary situations can only be solved by taking an educated leap into the unknown and seeking extraordinary solutions.”

The open letter is published here. Doctors from around the world can add their names to the current list of signatories by contacting: doctors4assange@gmail.com

Statements from signatories

Dr Stephen Frost, Specialist in Diagnostic Radiology (Stockholm, Sweden): “First we must save Julian Assange’s life and then we must safeguard his health, at least as far as that will be possible. Then we can all discuss how it ever came about that no fewer than five states—the UK, the US, Australia, Sweden and Ecuador—seemingly deliberately and cruelly conspired against one human being.

“We agree with the assessment of Nils Melzer, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, that Julian Assange has been ‘psychologically tortured’ in the centre of London of all places. We will leave it to others to determine precisely how and why that has been allowed to happen.

“People around the world expect the United Kingdom to do the right thing, even if belatedly. If the UK government does not heed doctors’ warnings and continues with its current reckless, dangerous and cruel behaviour, people from all over the world will rightly call for those responsible to be held to account. We say that the situation is medically urgent and that it must not be allowed to continue. There is no time to lose. The torture must stop NOW.”

Dr Sue Wareham OAM, retired General Practitioner (Australia): “Julian Assange, like other detainees, has a right to adequate health care, which—from the evidence of several experienced observers—he is being denied. This is totally unacceptable and makes a mockery of any pretence of justice or due process. It is imperative that he receive full and timely health care for any physical and mental health conditions.

“Many Australians are alarmed at our government’s apparent abandonment of Julian Assange, which is all the more shameful given Assange’s deteriorating health. It seems that the government cares more for hiding allegations of war crimes, such as the incidents that Assange helped bring to light, than for investigating them.

“Those accused of, or implicated in, war crimes should face court, rather than those who provide evidence. As the Australian and other governments lie about the disastrous wars and other shameful events our nation gets involved in, and use ‘national security’ as a stock standard pretext for government secrecy, ordinary citizens rely increasingly on

whistle-blowers to document truths that the public have a right to know. Whistle-blowers must be protected, not punished.”

Professor Andrew Samuels, Professor of Analytical Psychology, University of Essex (recently retired); Former Chair, UK Council for Psychotherapy (2009-2012) (UK): “Those psychotherapists, such as myself, who work with individuals who have been politically traumatised know well that it is the collective, governmental, smearing, undermining, isolating reputational damage—as well as physical torture—that undermines self-confidence and physical well-being.

“Imagine how it is for Assange believing that he is regarded by all as an evil man, as outside humanity. The knowledge that there is, to the contrary, informed and well-grounded support and understanding from mental health professionals and others is in itself therapeutic.”

Dr Lissa Johnson PhD, Clinical Psychologist (Australia): “As it stands, serious questions surround not only the health impacts of Mr Assange’s detention conditions, but his medical fitness to stand trial and prepare his defence. Independent specialist medical assessment is therefore needed to determine whether Julian Assange is medically fit for any of his pending legal proceedings.

“Consistent with its commitment to human rights and rule of law, the UK Government must heed the urgent warning of medical professionals from around the world, and transfer Julian Assange to an appropriately specialised and expert hospital setting, before it’s too late.

“The signatories to this open letter refuse to be silenced and are standing openly alongside the numerous medical and human rights authorities who have called, repeatedly and urgently, for the dangerous medical neglect of Julian Assange to end.”



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