

Over 100 doctors demand Australian government act to save the life of Julian Assange ‘before it is too late’

Our reporters
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Medical doctors from around the world have issued an open letter today calling on the Australian government to save the life of imprisoned WikiLeaks founder and journalist Julian Assange. More than 100 doctors from 13 countries are appealing to the Australian public for support.

The doctors are calling on the Australian government to “negotiate Julian Assange’s safe passage from Belmarsh Prison to an appropriate hospital setting in Australia, before it is too late.”

Signatories include eminent psychiatrists, surgeons, diagnosticians and senior medical researchers from the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Poland, Norway, Serbia, Sri Lanka and the United States.

The doctors have addressed their open letter to Foreign Minister Marise Payne. They state: “As Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, you have an undeniable legal obligation to protect your citizen against the abuse of his fundamental human rights, stemming from US efforts to extradite Mr Assange for journalism and publishing that exposed US war crimes.”

The letter has been copied to Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposition Anthony Albanese and Labor’s shadow foreign minister Senator Penny Wong.

The issuing of the letter has been reported in the Australian and international media, including by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age* and other Nine Network-owned newspapers, News Corp-owned suburban and regional publications, the *Guardian*, the Special Broadcasting Service and Sky News. It is circulating widely via independent news sources and

social media.

On November 22, the same group of doctors wrote to UK Home Secretary Priti Patel demanding Assange’s urgent medical transfer from Belmarsh maximum security prison to a university teaching hospital for expert assessment and care. They received no reply and a follow-up letter to Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice Robert Buckland QC on December 4 was similarly ignored.

The doctors’ extraordinary intervention follows public warnings by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment Nils Melzer last month. Melzer warned: “Unless the UK urgently changes course and alleviates his inhumane situation, Mr Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life.”

International legal and human rights experts have stated repeatedly that Assange is the victim of illegal and arbitrary detention and “prolonged psychological torture” in the UK.

In their open letter, the doctors reject claims by the Morrison government that Australia “is unable to intervene in Mr Assange’s legal proceedings,” explaining that Assange’s human rights are being violated. The doctors point to recent legal precedents in which the Australian government intervened to free Australian citizens detained abroad, including Melinda Taylor, James Ricketson, David Hicks and Peter Greste.

“The Australian government has shamefully been complicit by its refusal to act, over many years,” the doctors write. “Should Mr Assange die in a British prison, people will want to know what you, Minister,

did to prevent his death.”

The letter states: “That we, as doctors, feel ethically compelled to hold governments to account on medical grounds speaks volumes about the gravity of the medical, ethical and human rights travesties that are taking place. It is an extremely serious matter for an Australian citizen’s survival to be endangered by a foreign government obstructing his human right to health. It is an even more serious matter for that citizen’s own government to refuse to intervene, against historical precedent and numerous converging lines of medical advice.

“We are reliably advised that it is a well-established principle of international law—and of Australian law recognised by its own courts—that if a country’s citizens face improper treatment, persecution, and human rights violations, they may be the subject of diplomatic action, at that sovereign power’s discretion, to protect its citizens abroad. The Australian government must exercise that discretion and request from Britain the safe passage of Mr Assange to Australia, to protect Mr Assange and the rights of all Australian citizens.”

An Addendum to the open letter, titled “Medical Realities of Mr Assange’s case,” was included by doctors to inform the Australian public about the extreme medical risks posed by Assange’s ongoing psychological torture and incarceration.

“Psychological torture is not ‘torture light’... It can prove fatal,” they explain. “The term psychological torture is not a synonym for mere hardship, suffering or distress... [it] is the psychological equivalent of relentless physical starvation and assault, with the irreversible damage that such deprivation and abuse entails.”

It warns: “The potentially fatal medical consequences of prolonged psychological torture are inherently unpredictable and could strike at any time.”

Dr Stephen Frost, a specialist in diagnostic radiology and a leading signatory from the UK, said: “We appeal to the Australian public to support us in ensuring that the Australian government protects the rights of its citizens, which is its primary duty. There can be no exceptions.

“That doctors should have to write open letters to the UK and Australian governments to demand appropriate health care for a victim of torture is beyond belief. The

torture must stop now, and Mr Assange must be provided with immediate access to the health care which he so obviously needs before it is too late.”

The office of Minister for Foreign Affairs Payne and the office of Labor leader Anthony Albanese have not yet answered requests for their response to the demands of the doctors.

The full text of the doctor’s letter is available here.



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