

# Assange gives evidence in Spanish case against security contractor

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was brought from Belmarsh Prison yesterday to appear in person at Westminster Magistrates Court and provide video-link witness testimony in the Spanish prosecution of David Morales, the founder of security firm UC Global. Morales, a former Spanish military officer, is accused of spying on Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy and was charged in October with privacy violation, bribery and money laundering.

The hearing was held in private session. No members of the media or the public were allowed inside the courtroom to see or hear Assange, on the remarkable grounds that the Spanish prosecution of UC Global involves “matters of national security.” His appearance took place 24 hours after he appeared via video-link in a case management hearing ahead of the scheduled February 24 trial on the application by the United States to extradite him. Assange has been charged with 17 counts of espionage and is threatened with life imprisonment over his role in WikiLeaks’ publication of the documents leaked by whistleblower Chelsea Manning which exposed US war crimes and diplomatic intrigues.

The Morales case has major implications for the US extradition attempt. UC Global was contracted by the Ecuadorian government to provide security for its embassy in London, where Assange sought and was granted political asylum in June 2012. Instead of protecting Assange, Morales’s company is known to have illegally monitored and recorded every aspect of his personal life from 2015 until March 2018. Investigations published by Spanish newspaper *El Pais* and Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* have uncovered evidence that leaves little doubt the surveillance was carried out on behalf of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Among the numerous conversations that were illegally spied on were confidential discussions between Assange and his lawyers and doctors, meaning his fundamental

legal right to privacy in these matters was violated.

Assange’s British lawyers made clear again yesterday that they intend to use the evidence arising from the UC Global case to argue that the extradition application should be rejected out-of-hand, as it further proves he will not receive a fair trial in the US. A major precedent was set in the 1970s, when the case against Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg was quashed following the revelation that President Richard Nixon had overseen spying on consultations between Ellsberg and his doctors.

The importance of the UC Global case was underscored when British authorities initially refused to comply with the European Investigation Order (EIO) issued by Spanish Judge José de la Mata requesting that Assange be made available to provide witness testimony. His appearance yesterday only took place due to considerable media coverage of a formal complaint by de la Mata. *El Pais* observed that the backdown took place because Britain’s stance was “viewed as resistance to an investigation that could hinder Assange’s extradition to the US.”

Morales and UC Global greatly enhanced security equipment and procedures at the Ecuadorian embassy in 2017, the same year Trump announced a stepping up of US intelligence operations against Assange. This included fitting cameras with recording devices and putting secret microphones throughout the spaces used by Assange in the embassy.

According to *La Repubblica* journalist Stefania Maurizi, who obtained files evidencing UC Global’s spying operation, among those recorded were doctors, journalists, politicians and celebrities who visited Assange. UC Global compiled profiles on Assange’s London-based lawyer Jennifer Robinson and the head of his legal team in Spain, Baltasar Garzon. A series of photographs seen by Maurizi shows that Garzon was also followed. Her own phone and USB sticks were tampered with.

Maurizi wrote on November 18: “Nothing and no one

was spared. Even the most inviolable meetings were violated—video and audio footage seen by *Repubblica* show a half-naked Julian Assange during a medical check-up, the Ecuadorian ambassador Carlos Abad Ortiz and his staff during one of their diplomatic meetings, two of Assange’s lawyers, Gareth Peirce and Aitor Martinez, entering the women’s bathroom for a private conversation with their client.

“It was Julian Assange who suggested holding the legal meetings inside the women’s toilet due to his suspicion of being under intense surveillance. Lawyers had considered it paranoid on Assange’s part, and UC Global had reassured them on this count, but in reality microphones had even been placed inside the women’s toilet.” (See: “A massive scandal: how Assange, his doctors, lawyers and visitors were all spied on for the US”)

According to the *New York Times*, the 61-page court filing issued by the Spanish public prosecutor states that the information collected in the embassy was sent to UC Global’s headquarters in Jerez de la Frontera, in southern Spain.

In a hearing before Judge José de la Mata, Morales has claimed that all recordings were taken on behalf of the Ecuadorian secret service and that the work was known to the country’s ambassador. He claims that “there was absolutely no outside access” to any information gathered inside the embassy. However, testimony taken from former company employees alleges that Morales travelled once or twice a month to the United States and took hard disks of recordings with him. The employees also allege that Morales ordered them to keep these trips secret from Ecuadorian officials.

In 2015, Morales signed a contract with the casino company Las Vegas Sands, which the prosecution claims functioned as his go-between with the CIA. The owner of Las Vegas Sands is Sheldon Adelson, “one of the main donors to the Republican Party and a personal friend of Donald Trump,” according to *El Pais*.

Morales is alleged to have returned from a security fair in Las Vegas and told an employee: “From now on, we play in the first league... We are now working for the dark side”—explaining that this meant working for US agencies.

Speaking outside the court yesterday, the former Ecuadorian legal consul in London, Fidel Navraez, rejected Morales’s claim that the surveillance was carried out on behalf of Ecuadorian agencies. “That company [UC Global] was contracted by Ecuador in order to protect the embassy, protect Julian Assange, protect the

embassy staff... but it is a corrupt company, we know that now,” he stated.

Illegal spying is just one of the host of outrages perpetrated against Assange by the US, British, Swedish, Ecuadorian and Australian governments. On Thursday, Assange’s legal team submitted several bundles of evidence to be presented in his defence against US extradition early next year. These covered the blatantly political nature of the Espionage Act charges levelled by the US government, evidence relating to Chelsea Manning, public statements by US politicians denouncing Assange and WikiLeaks which jeopardise any prospect of a fair trial, as well as evidence relating to abuse of due process, vindictive prison conditions and denial of medical treatment.

Speaking with the *New York Times*, Amy Jeffress, a former Justice Department attaché at the American embassy in London, claimed that the illegality exposed in the UC Global case was not relevant to Assange’s extradition. According to the *Times*, she asserted that “the legal standard is whether extradition would comply with Britain’s Human Rights Act, which protects the right to privacy but balances it against considerations like national security and fighting crime.”

Such statements serve only to underscore the hostility within the political establishment for the fundamental legal rights and democratic principles at stake in the case of Julian Assange. Assange has never committed a crime. In the public interest, and in partnership with major newspapers around the world, WikiLeaks published leaked documents that revealed rampant criminality on the part of the American and other governments.

The relentless nine-year persecution of Assange—including the flagrant violation of his human rights and the monitoring of his every word and movement while he was supposed to be protected by political asylum—is aimed at terrorising all would-be whistleblowers and journalists into silence.



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