

Julian Assange “slowly dying” and “often sedated” in Belmarsh prison

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On Christmas Eve, WikiLeaks founder and prize-winning journalist Julian Assange phoned a friend to alert the world that his life is in danger inside London’s notorious maximum-security Belmarsh prison.

Vaughan Smith, a freelance video news journalist who gave refuge to Assange in 2010 when he was legally fighting against attempts to extradite him to Sweden, tweeted that Assange called his family on Christmas Eve. Smith wrote: “He told my wife and I how he was slowly dying in Belmarsh where, though only on remand, he is kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day and is often sedated. His US extradition proceedings start in February...”

Assange’s phone call highlights the danger that he could die in prison, effectively at the hands of the British government of Boris Johnson, acting in league with the Trump administration and the Australian government, which has refused to intervene on behalf of Assange, an Australian citizen.

By what authority, or on what pretext, Assange is being tranquilised, and kept isolated, remains unknown. Despite growing public outrage, demands for explanations have gone unanswered.

Such mistreatment of a prisoner who is only on remand—not convicted of any offence whatsoever—cannot possibly be explained innocently. It not only defies all known precedents regarding detainees awaiting trial or, in Assange’s case, lengthy extradition proceedings. It also defies urgent medical advice.

Assange’s plea for help underscores the warnings made over the past two months by doctors from around the world, putting the British and Australian governments on notice that Assange’s health is deteriorating so rapidly, he might die in jail.

The WikiLeaks founder, together with whistleblower

Chelsea Manning, is being persecuted, possibly to the point of death, for helping to bring to the world the truth about the war crimes, anti-democratic intrigues and mass surveillance conducted globally by the US government and its close allies, notably Britain and Australia.

In 2010, WikiLeaks, acting in partnership with several major corporate media outlets, published hundreds of thousands of secret documents exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, including US-led coup plots and other forms of political interference in country after country. It also released the “Collateral Murder” video showing the gunning down of civilians and journalists in Baghdad in July 2007.

If extradited to the US, Assange faces imprisonment for up to 175 years on openly political charges under the US Espionage Act—charges that represent a frontal attack on free speech and media freedom globally.

Last month more than 60 medical doctors wrote to the UK government urging that Assange be transferred immediately from prison to a university teaching hospital for multi-disciplinary medical assessment and care, including by experts in psychological torture.

The doctors cited UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Professor Nils Melzer, who visited Assange earlier this year with two medical experts. Melzer has written to the British, US and Australian governments stating that Assange is being psychologically tortured and “today we are at a point where he could collapse at any moment.”

In a further letter, more than 100 doctors from around the globe put Australia’s government on notice that Assange’s health is deteriorating rapidly. In an open letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne, the doctors urged the

government to intervene and get him medical treatment before it is too late. “It is an extremely serious matter for an Australian citizen’s survival to be endangered by a foreign government,” the letter said.

The doctors are concerned that the psychological stress Assange has been under, which is akin to psychological torture, is manifesting in physical ailments and he could suffer a stroke, cardiac arrest or other fatal health problem at any time. An addendum to the doctors’ letter, listing the “medical realities” regarding Assange’s case, warned: “The potentially fatal medical consequences of prolonged psychological torture are inherently unpredictable, and could strike at any time...

“We reiterate that it is fundamentally incompatible with basic standards of medical care to attempt to treat a psychological torture victim while holding them in the very conditions assessed as comprising torture, and which led to the onset, persistence and severity of symptoms...

“Accordingly, no doctor, no matter how senior, can offer any legitimate assurances regarding Julian Assange’s survival or medical stability while he continues to be held in Belmarsh prison.”

Such is the mounting demand for Assange’s freedom that the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* published an interview with Assange’s mother, Christine Assange, on December 22. While voicing her anguish at not being able to speak to her son since he was arrested in April, let alone celebrate Christmas with him, she issued an impassioned plea for public support for the campaign to force the Australian government to ensure her son’s safe return to Australia.

“All I want for Christmas is my son Julian to be home safe with his family, under the protection of his country, to be free from this nine-year unlawful and brutal political persecution and to heal from the human rights abuses and torture which have damaged his mind and body,” she said.

“If he ends up in US hands, there will be a show trial and there will be nothing fair or just about it. He will never see the light of day again. He is accused of engaging in multi-award winning journalism, not hurting anyone.”

More than 1,030 journalists and media workers from every corner of the globe have so far signed an open letter to all the governments complicit in Assange’s

torture, demanding his unconditional freedom and an immediate “end to the legal campaign being waged against him for the crime of revealing war crimes.”

The signatories include WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson, world-renowned investigative journalist John Pilger, Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers whistleblower who revealed the full criminality of the Vietnam War, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North and leading WSWWS reporters.

Neither the British or Australian governments have replied to the doctors and journalists. The same contemptuous silence has come from the Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese and shadow foreign minister Penny Wong, to whom the doctors’ letter was also addressed. Just as much as the Johnson and Morrison governments, the Labor Party is totally committed to the US-led military alliance and alignment behind Washington’s preparations for new wars.

As the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWWS have insisted from the outset, no US, British or Australian government will free Assange unless it is compelled to do so by a mass movement from below. The campaign to build such a movement must now be stepped up urgently.



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