

Julian Assange attends procedural hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange appeared in person in central London at Westminster Magistrates Court yesterday, at a hearing scheduled to process the submission of defence evidence. The hearing was the latest procedural step in the extradition request from the US for Assange, which will be subject of a scheduled four-week trial beginning next month.

It was revealed that, since his last hearing on December 19, Assange had been granted just two hours total to review that evidence with his legal team. What is being conducted in the British courts is not a trial but a legal farce, designed to cover up the lawless rendition of a political prisoner to a country that brazenly assassinates political opponents.

Assange is wanted by his US persecutors on trumped-up Espionage Act charges that could see him jailed for 175 years. Assange and whistle-blower Chelsea Manning are being persecuted for their role in bringing to the world's population the truth about the war crimes, anti-democratic intrigues and mass surveillance conducted globally by the US government and other imperialist powers, including the United Kingdom.

Assange appeared defiant in court. He held a short conversation with his lawyer Gareth Peirce and nodded to and saluted his supporters gathered in the public gallery before the hearing began. He also raised his clenched fist to the gallery as he left the dock.

Peirce began the hearing with reference to the continuing and deliberate isolation of Assange from his lawyers and the impossibility of conducting a defence on this basis.

According to Peirce, evidence that is yet to be submitted includes a volume on prison conditions that she has only begun to discuss with her client. There are three further "substantial volumes" of exhibited material that Assange had not yet had a chance to see at all.

The legal team had hoped, Peirce noted, to have time to go through this material while Assange was held in the cells at Westminster Magistrates Court, after a "difficult journey" in a police van from the maximum security Belmarsh prison where he is being incarcerated. However, court security insisted that an interview could not be guaranteed, and that

any session would be limited to just one hour.

Peirce explained "this has set us back on our timetable enormously."

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser was unmoved. She stated that there were 47 people held in the court's cells and eight available interview rooms, and that therefore the decision to limit Assange's time was "not an unreasonable position for them to take."

Baraitser has repeatedly refused to direct Belmarsh prison to make more visiting time available to Assange's lawyers, despite the availability of interview rooms. In a previous hearing, she brazenly questioned how important it actually was for Peirce to go over this information in detail with her client.

When Baraitser asked how much time had so far been available to Assange's legal team to discuss the evidence in question with him, Peirce responded that, since their last contact with the court, they had just two hours.

This was compounded, as what little time was available this week was reduced by the last-minute change of the hearing date from Tuesday to Monday.

Peirce said, "We did not book a visit for tomorrow [Tuesday] because we thought it was a court day, so we have lost the opportunity for that. If it were made available, we would take it." Baraitser made no move to address this issue.

In the coming days, Assange will have just one hour-long Thursday afternoon session at Belmarsh to review the remaining evidence before the deadline for submission at the end of the week.

On Belmarsh prison's continued refusal to allow Assange sufficient time to review his case with his lawyers, Peirce said, "We have pushed Belmarsh in every way" and indicated that the legal team were seriously considering launching a judicial review—"it is a breach of a defendant's rights."

Speaking outside the court, Joseph Farrell, WikiLeaks ambassador and a Centre for Investigative Journalism board member, said, "Julian has had extremely poor access to his lawyers. The reason he was brought here in person was that

after the hearing he would be able to stay and work through the evidence, at least pieces of it, with his lawyers. Due to the various limitations here at Westminster court the judge said that he would be entitled to an hour. His lawyer pointed out that since the last time he spoke to the court he had only received two hours with his lawyers and that the way Belmarsh has been acting is brinking on judicial review.

“The idea that somebody doesn’t have access to their lawyers when they’re facing a life sentence, when they have 175 years [of imprisonment] ahead of them, when the prosecution has had 10 years to mount the hardest case that they have with unlimited resources, and for somebody to have three hours with their lawyers in order to sign off on their future, it’s unacceptable.”

Also in attendance at the hearing was independent journalist Tareq Haddad. Haddad resigned from the US magazine *Newsweek* in December after its editors refused to publish his story on the documented doctoring of an Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) report on an alleged chemical attack in Douma, Syria, in April 2018.

The WWS spoke with Haddad about his resignation and about his views on the Assange case:

“I frequently write about foreign affairs and international politics. When Turkey’s invasion of Syria started, I was asked to report on that and a week into the Turkish invasion there was alleged white phosphorous use by Turkey, so I investigated that. In the course of that investigation I was interviewing a lot of chemical weapons investigators or people from bodies related to chemical weapons such as the International Committee for the Red Cross.

“As I was doing that story, I started to hear rumblings of leaks within the OPCW. At the very beginning it wasn’t something I could report on but as I followed it more closely it reached the point at which I thought ‘okay, something needs to be printed.’ And that point was the documents released by WikiLeaks, then the letter which hadn’t yet been released by WikiLeaks, which was published in the *Mail on Sunday*, and then when that letter was verified by *Reuters*. ...

“Even when I had this, I was told I couldn’t report on it, and that was the moment I had to resign. Also, in the process of trying to write this story, I was personally attacked and smeared as a journalist despite not having any prior issues with my stories. It was only when I tried to write anything controversial that my character started to be attacked. They said that the sources I was using for my stories—not just this one but all them—were bad sources or that I was editorialising. I’ve got over a thousand by-lines for *International Business Times*, I’ve got over 200 by-lines for *Newsweek* and this never came up. It was only when I was trying to discuss the doctoring of chemical weapons

reports.”

Asked about the wider war danger in the Middle East, Haddad said, “So what’s happened in Syria is part of a much wider process. Essentially, what’s been happening for the last 50 or 60 years is that the United States and the United Kingdom have been repeatedly breaking international law, invading countries, not respecting international sovereignty.

“Now there’s a fairly recent alliance of Russia, China, Iran, Iraq that all kind of agree that we’re stronger together than apart and our alliance should be centred on two things: international sovereignty and the following of international law. They have their own bad records in these areas, but they understand that it’s in their interests to stand up for this, because they’ve been the victims of US foreign policy all this time.

“My understanding of what’s going on in relation to Assange is that freedom of speech is very quickly dying or already dead in the Western world. This case is symbolic of something much bigger. People need to be aware of it and understand the complexity of the case. It’s inspiring to see so many people here. I think it’s one of the most important court cases in the history of the West, for sure. And it will have a symbolic outcome. If freedom of speech is not respected here, in the case of Assange, it’s not going to be respected in wider society and the world that we live in is not going to look the same in a few years. We’re already going down that path of authoritarianism.”

Assange’s next procedural hearing is scheduled for Thursday, January 23.



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