

Sri Lanka: Prominent journalist and cartoonist call for Julian Assange's freedom

Our correspondent

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Prominent Sri Lankan journalist Gihan de Chickera and Sajith Bandara, a young cartoonist, issued statements to the WSWS this week defending imprisoned WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and endorsing the international campaign for his freedom.

They have condemned the attempt to dispatch Assange from Britain to the US, where he faces the prospect of 175 years imprisonment under the draconian Espionage Act. Their statements were made days after the first week of the British extradition court hearing, which began on February 25, and can only be described as a show-trial.

Chickera is a well-known journalist and cartoonist who has been working at the *Daily Mirror*, one of Sri Lanka's highest circulation newspapers for more than fifteen years. He was awarded best cartoonist of the year in 2012 and has also acted in several Sinhala stage dramas.

Sajith Bandara has produced cartoons for the *Mirror* for several years.

We publish their statements below.

Gihan de Chickera: Julian Assange is an award-winning journalist who is being politically persecuted for doing his job. He is not a traitor, but an informer of the public.

He has exposed US war crimes through WikiLeaks, including video footage of civilians and journalists being gunned down by a US military helicopter in Baghdad. From 2006 to 2018, WikiLeaks has released hundreds of thousands of documents exposing a host of crimes and corruption.

But while the alleged perpetrators of these crimes remain free, Assange has been subject to continuous harassment. He now faces extradition to the US under espionage charges which carry a maximum 175-year

prison sentence.

The Espionage Act was drafted in 1917 after the US entered the First World War, and has been used against many radical and progressive working class leaders. These include Bill Haywood of the International Workers of the World (IWW), Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party, labour activist Ralph Chaplin and political activist and writer Emma Goldman. Like Assange, these leaders were opposed to authoritarianism and imperialist war, and were targeted as a result. A century later, Assange faces a similar predicament.

South Asian journalists too have faced continuous oppression. In Sri Lanka, investigations into high profile cases like the Lasantha Wickrematunge murder and Prageeth Eknaligoda's disappearance are at a standstill. And Kashmir has experienced an internet shutdown and media blackout. These are just a couple of examples among numerous cases.

In this light, it is heartening to see a growing global movement raising its voices in support of Assange. I join these voices in condemning the persecution of Assange, and call for his immediate release. He, and journalists everywhere, must be free to continue their work unhindered.

Sajith Bandara: I strongly condemn the unjust imprisonment of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange by the US and other imperialist powers, for exposing the truth of the imperialist war crimes that have been carried out on the pretext of eliminating terrorism.

I fully support the action of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* to defend and liberate him. He is a victim of imperialism.

The imprisonment of the Assange for fearlessly

revealing the truth is a recent blow to the freedom of the press under capitalism.

Together with the world working class, we fight for all the social and democratic rights of the working class by supporting and defending Assange's actions against imperialist war.



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