

Julian Assange to apply for bail amid coronavirus dangers in British prisons

Oscar Grenfell
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WikiLeaks announced this morning that Julian Assange's lawyers will file a bail application at Westminster Magistrates Court tomorrow. The attempt to secure Assange's release from the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison comes amid warnings that the British penitentiary system is at risk of an eruption of coronavirus infections.

A press release issued by WikiLeaks states that Assange's lawyers "will argue that he is vulnerable to the COVID-19 outbreak in the prison where he is on remand."

The WikiLeaks' founder suffers from a raft of medical conditions, stemming from almost a decade of arbitrary detention. He has been denied adequate medical care since his incarceration in Belmarsh Prison began last April. This has prompted doctors from around the world to repeatedly demand that he be transferred to a university teaching hospital and to warn that he may die if urgent action is not taken.

The release cites the calls for Assange's freedom made by United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, along with those issued by representatives of the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe. Melzer found last May that Assange was showing medically-verifiable symptoms of psychological torture due to the protracted persecution and the "public mobbing" he has endured.

WikiLeaks noted the clear dangers that the coronavirus pandemic, which is rapidly spreading throughout Britain and internationally, could have catastrophic consequences across the prison system.

In comments to the *Guardian* this morning, Dr Hans Kluge, regional director of the World Health Organisation (WHO) for Europe, warned of mass infections in prisons across Europe and internationally unless the "boldest of actions" were taken.

Carina Ferreira-Borges, WHO director for prisoners'

health, added: "We are talking about a highly vulnerable population in overcrowded conditions and once COVID-19 gets inside prisons, everyone will be contaminated very quickly."

"There is a risk of a huge mortality rate and unprecedented burden on the national health systems of countries that are already overstretched," Ferreira-Borges said.

Within Britain, the WikiLeaks press release cited Andrea Albutt, the president of the British Prison Governors' Association, who has warned there "will be deaths" in penitentiaries. The Prison Officers' Association has likened the risk in jails to those present on cruise ships. Neil Hardwick, the former chief inspector of British prisons, has called for all low-risk inmates to be released.

On March 16, the Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS), an independent legal charity that offers representation and information to inmates, issued a call for the immediate release of a raft of low-risk inmates. They included all prisoners over the age of 75; those over 50 convicted of non-violent offenses; all immigration detainees; prisoners with less than a year to serve and those being held on extradition requests.

In an opinion piece published in the *Guardian*, Eric Allison, a PAS trustee, documented the horrific conditions in British prisons that make a substantial coronavirus outbreak almost inevitable.

He pointed to a report by the National Audit Office last month, which found that a number of prisons were in physical disrepair, with leaking roofs, failing heating systems and rat infestations. A parliamentary inspection last year found that 10 of 35 prisons did not meet minimum hygiene and cleanliness requirements.

Allison documented the appalling medical care provided to prisoners. He recalled one instance in which a prisoner was provided with a paracetamol after complaining of

severe leg pain. It later became clear that he was suffering from gangrene and his limb was amputated.

Allison referred to the fact that Professor Richard Coker, an expert on the spread of infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, has warned that a coronavirus outbreak may affect as many as 60 percent of all prisoners. Already, two prisoners have tested positive, one at HMP Manchester and the other at a prison in Wales.

Pointing to the risks facing Assange, WikiLeaks stated that “HMP Belmarsh receives 300 new prisoners every month, most of whom are then dispersed to prisons around the country. HMP Belmarsh has a total of approximately 800 prisoners and the highest suicide rate in the prison system.” It noted that Assange should be released, based on the PAS guideline.

Despite the growing demands, the British authorities have thus far refused to remove any prisoners from the penitentiary system. This is of a piece with the negligent response of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to the pandemic, including its initial policy of wilfully allowing the virus to spread on the absurd pretext that this would create “herd immunity.”

The refusal to release Assange is particularly criminal. The WikiLeaks publisher has not been convicted of any offence. He is being held solely to facilitate an extradition request from the US government, which is seeking to prosecute Assange on charges under the Espionage Act and imprison him for life over WikiLeaks’ exposures of US war crimes, global diplomatic intrigues and human rights violations.

After Assange was expelled from Ecuador’s London embassy and arrested by the British police on April 11, he was immediately convicted of bail offences. The conviction, however, was a travesty of justice. Assange had already forfeited his bail monies, and the initial legal basis for his 2011 arrest by British police—a Swedish international arrest warrant—had been dropped years before.

Despite this, Assange was sentenced to 50 weeks in prison, although bail offences usually do not incur a custodial penalty. In September, when Assange was eligible to be released, Judge Vanessa Baraitser preemptively denied Assange bail, declaring that he was a “flight risk” and would remain imprisoned until the completion of his extradition hearing.

Baraitser cited the fact that in 2012, Assange had sought asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy when he was under British bail restrictions. Assange only took the action,

however, after he had exhausted all legal appeals in Britain. He faced the imminent prospect of extradition to Sweden, merely to answer a prosecutor’s “questions,” under conditions in which the country’s authorities would not provide any guarantee that they would not dispatch him to the US to be imprisoned for WikiLeaks’ publishing activities.

While he was effectively detained in the Ecuadorian embassy, as a result of British threats to arrest him if he set foot outside the building, Assange’s status as a political refugee was repeatedly upheld by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. As UN Rapporteur Nils Melzer and other legal experts have stated, the claims that Assange “evaded justice” in 2012 are aimed at criminalising political asylum.

The ongoing imprisonment of Assange is one expression of a multi-pronged assault on his legal and democratic rights. This was exemplified during the first week of the British extradition hearing that began on February 18. Assange was repeatedly handcuffed and stripped naked and had his legal documents stolen by prison guards. He was isolated at the back of the court room in a bullet-proof glass box to prevent him from participating in the proceedings.

The International Bar Associations’ Human Rights Institute warned that his treatment was likely a violation of British and international law.

The dangers confronting Assange—from his threatened extradition to the US, to his heightened health risks in prison—underscore the urgency of building a mass movement of workers and young people to secure his complete freedom. The same authorities that have spearheaded the persecution of the WikiLeaks founder are imperilling not only his life, but those of millions of people around the world, with their criminally-negligent response to the coronavirus pandemic.



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