Julian Assange still held on remand as coronavirus spreads through UK prisons

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Just one week after Julian Assange's request for bail in recognition of the threat posed to his life by COVID-19 was denied, the spread of the coronavirus through the prison system is escalating alarmingly.

The WikiLeaks founder, held in Belmarsh prison facing extradition to the US for exposing war crimes, has a chronic lung condition and has had his health destroyed by a decade of mistreatment by the British state, amounting to psychological torture.

Already on Monday, 55 inmates were reported infected across 21 different prisons in the UK, plus 18 prison staff and four escort staff. The number of prisoners testing positive was double the total just three days before. By Tuesday, the number had risen again to 65, across 23 prisons. According to the *Mirror*, around 6,000 prison and probation staff are currently in self-isolation—12 percent of the workforce. Two prisoners have already been killed by the virus, the first on March 22 and the second on March 26.

The direction of travel is indicated by Rikers Jail in New York city. On March 31 there were 180 reported cases in the prison out of a population of 4,604, meaning an infection rate eight times higher than the already severely affected city itself.

In the UK, the barbaric response of the authorities has been to "cohort" prisoners who display coronavirus-type symptoms, like a fever or cough, with confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The *Guardian* reports that last week in Wandsworth prison in South West London, 12 coronavirus patients were kept with another 40 inmates with coughs and respiratory problems in the same "isolation wing" and in shared cells. This is in line with Ministry of Justice (MoJ) virus guidelines which read, "If facing multiple cases of those displaying symptoms, 'cohorting', or the gathering of potentially infected cases into a designated area, may be necessary." There are apparently no plans for more tests at the prison and one wing has had no hot water supply for a week.

Unsanitary conditions are commonplace throughout the prisons system. A report from the National Audit Office earlier this year revealed a general state of chronic disrepair, including leaking rooms, broken heating systems and rat infestations. Last year, prison inspectors found that ten out of the thirty-five institutions they inspected did not meet minimum standards of cleanliness and infection-control compliance.

Belmarsh prison has a poor record on infection control. Noting that Assange has previously had significant dental problems, the *Daily Maverick* writes that a 2007 report by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons discovered that "infection control was inadequate," citing "a lack of infection control measures in the dental suite."

The *Daily Maverick* article also references inspections from 2009 and 2011 which concluded that "infection control and decontamination standards were still not sufficiently good" and that "the dental surgery should be refurbished to meet infection control guidelines." In 2013, another report found that this recommendation was "not achieved." Last year, the Independent Monitoring Boards reported that "major safety and decency concerns remain," while "the state of the showers and many of the toilets across the prison is appalling."

Given these appalling conditions, prisoners' rights groups have called for the release of older, non-violent and vulnerable inmates.

Deborah Coles, director of the charity Inquest, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson saying, "People in prison are already dying. Many detention settings already have the virus within their walls, with thousands of frontline staff self-isolating… the prison service is making plans to store the bodies of prisoners who will die in the coming months… The government has a legal and moral obligation to protect the lives of

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detained persons from a foreseeable danger to their health."

Emily Bolton, legal director of advocacy group Appeal, stated, "For the government to leave prisoners to die of Covid-19 behind bars when these deaths could be avoided is like leaving prisoners to drown in Orleans parish prison when the waters rose after Hurricane Katrina… time is running out to avoid minor offences becoming capital crimes, and life sentences from becoming death sentences."

Faced with a catastrophe, the government is making a few very limited moves to release some prisoners.

Around 200 inmates in Northern Ireland—roughly 7 percent of the total—who are currently in the last three months of their sentence for non-violent offences will be released soon, under curfew and conditions which restrict their contacts with others. Scottish prisons are considering similar plans, with Scottish Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf saying, "We are actively looking at options to do that. It could happen as early as next week. The situation is increasingly alarming."

In England and Wales, the Ministry of Justice has said pregnant women "not considered a high risk to the public" will be temporarily issued with an electronic tag within days.

Any additional releases are understood to have been ruled out. The Justice department insists that "robust contingency plans" have been put in place. No consideration whatsoever will be given to Assange—one of only two prisoners held on remand, as an innocent man, in Belmarsh maximum security prison.

In a video released on Wednesday, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Kristinn Hrafnsson said, "A week ago, Magistrates Court Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied the request to set Julian Assange free on bail because of the extraordinary circumstances of Covid-19. She did so by citing that there were no known cases of Covid-19 in Belmarsh prison and that she had full faith in the prison authorities.

"Only a few hours later that same day those authorities had to admit that there were numerous cases of Covid-19 in the UK prisons. And those numbers have been going up day by day. Last week we knew that more than a hundred guards in Belmarsh were staying at home in self-isolation, and those numbers have now escalated. We have learned now that they doubled over the weekend…

"The media reports today that prisoners with flu-like symptoms are forced to share cells with other inmates. This is outrageous if not criminal. This cannot go on. No one knows how widespread the virus is at the prison. No one is testing…

"It doesn't take an expert to understand that the prison environment is the worst environment for illnesses such as Covid-19. The parliamentary group of the Council of Europe has said that there's only one journalist in a UK prison. That journalist is Julian Assange. He has to be released immediately. Do not forget that he is on remand. He is innocent according to the law. Release Julian Assange right now."

Doctors for Assange have released a statement saying, "[District Judge] Baraitser did not address the increased risk to Mr Assange relative to the general UK prison population, let alone prisoners at HMP Belmarsh where Assange is incarcerated. Nor did she address the rapidly emerging medical and legal consensus that vulnerable and low-risk prisoners should be released, immediately…

"Baraitser's assurance that government measures were adequate to protect Mr Assange rang hollow on the very day the UK government announced that Prince Charles tested positive for Covid-19. If the UK government cannot protect its own royal family from the disease, how can it adequately protect its most vulnerable prisoners in prisons, which have been described as 'breeding grounds' for coronavirus?"

The British ruling class are using one monstrous crime to achieve another. Their inaction in response to the pandemic has created a time-bomb in UK prisons whose consequences they now intend Assange to suffer. They would be happy to see him die. More than ever, his life depends on the defence of WikiLeaks and democratic rights becoming a mass issue in the international working class. We encourage everyone to join the Global Defence Campaign and publicise its work and material widely.

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