

As it releases thousands of prisoners, UK government keeps Julian Assange locked-up in danger

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In response to the coronavirus crisis, the British Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has announced plans for the early release of up to 4,000 prisoners in England and Wales—just under 5 percent of the prison population. The selected “low-risk” prisoners in the last two months of their sentences will be electronically tagged and allowed back into the population to ease overcrowding.

But the MoJ confirmed to the Australian Associated Press that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange would not be released on the mendacious and vindictive grounds that he is “not serving a custodial sentence” and so is not eligible under the terms of the legislation.

Assange is currently held on remand—that is, he is not charged with any crime or serving any sentence in the UK—in Belmarsh maximum security prison in London. He is part-way through an extradition hearing to decide on his extradition to the United States, where he faces a series of charges under the Espionage Act with a potential combined sentence of 175 years.

The MoJ has in effect ruled that because Assange is an innocent man, he must remain in prison, and at grave risk to his life. Government promises of “robust plans” to reduce the spread of the virus through the prison system are belied by the rapid spread of cases and suspected cases in jails across the country.

As of Saturday, 88 prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19 across 29 prisons, along with 15 prison staff across nine jails, meaning the virus is already present in at least a quarter of institutions in England and Wales. Another 1,200 prisoners are believed to be self-isolating, as are around 8,000 prison staff—one quarter of the total. Assange’s legal team reported last Tuesday that 200 staff at Belmarsh were among them.

Three prisoners infected with the virus have already died, two of them at HMP Littlehey in Cambridgeshire.

Lawyer Simon Creighton, who has clients at Littlehey, told BBC Newsnight: “If you think about how cruise ships have been seen as Petri dishes, prisons are about 1,000 times worse. Some of the contact I’ve had with prisoners over the last week has been terrifying.”

On Saturday it was reported that two prison staff at Pentonville prison in North London had also died with COVID-19 infections.

Assange has a chronic lung condition and has had his health systematically destroyed by years of arbitrary detention and psychological torture.

After bail was denied on March 16, the campaign group Doctors for Assange wrote an open letter signed by 200 doctors which warned, “Julian Assange’s life and health are at heightened risk due to his arbitrary detention during this global pandemic. That threat will only grow as the coronavirus spreads.”

Dr. Stephen Frost, a spokesperson for Doctors for Assange, told the WSW, “This Kafkaesque and sadistic decision by the UK government must be opposed by all doctors. It marks a continuation of the prolonged psychological torture of Julian Assange, as found by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Professor Nils Melzer, in May 2019. Mr. Assange’s life is in grave danger.”

This past Friday, psychiatrist and co-founder of the Critical Psychiatry Network, Dr. Duncan B. Double, wrote a sharp statement for *Critical Psychiatry*, concluding, “The psychological torture of Julian Assange must end. His mental state is putting him at physical risk of dying.”

The next day a paper by clinical psychologist Dr. Lissa Johnson, signed by 21 psychiatrists and psychologists, reiterated the physical harm done to Assange by his psychological abuse:

“Via immunosuppressive and cardiovascular mechanisms, persistently and chronically activated stress physiology causes susceptibility to a range of potentially catastrophic illnesses and diseases... With chronic and severe stress, for example, and chronically elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol, both immune cells and brain cells can physically self-destruct, a process known as apoptosis... Cortisol also exerts other well documented immunosuppressive effects, which impair the body’s ability to fight disease...”

There is only one conclusion to be drawn from these events. The British government is determined to see Assange dead. The case for his release by any genuine standards of justice is overwhelming.

The WikiLeaks founder is one of only two prisoners currently being held in Belmarsh prison on remand, pending the completion of an extradition trial for manifestly non-violent “crimes”—in fact, for the exposure of war crimes.

Yesterday marked the 10th anniversary of WikiLeaks’ publication of the Collateral Murder video showing the indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians—including two journalists—by a team of two US Apache helicopters in Al-Amin al-Thaniya, Baghdad.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser’s decision to hold Assange—the most famous political prisoner in the world—on remand as a “flight risk” in September 2019 was outrageous. Her refusal to grant him bail for the same reasons two weeks ago, under conditions of a national lockdown, was a cruel farce. Assange’s state of health puts him clearly in the high-risk category for the coronavirus.

The completion of his extradition hearing, scheduled to resume for at least three weeks on May 18, will in all likelihood be postponed. Every day, the danger of his contracting a life-threatening disease increases.

Assange’s desperate situation demands, in spite of all the difficulties imposed by the pandemic and the lockdown, an urgent response. Dr. Johnson’s recent paper concludes, “Should Julian Assange die in prison, whether from coronavirus or any other catastrophic

health outcome, we will have become a society that tortures its journalists to death publicly and with impunity, as a warning to all.”

No effort can be spared in the fight to save the life of the most significant journalist of the 21st century. Committees for his defence must be organised amongst colleagues, classmates and neighbours, using every possible avenue of communication and means of organisation demanding his immediate release from Belmarsh prison.



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