

Vindictive court rulings prove British state wants Assange dead

Thomas Scripps
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In a London court hearing yesterday, District Judge Vanessa Baraitser declared that the extradition show trial of Julian Assange will proceed in May, despite the fact that Britain is under a national lockdown and the coronavirus pandemic is rapidly spreading through the country's prison system.

Baraitser's ruling was the second in a fortnight that places Assange's life and safety in jeopardy and underscores the travesty of justice being perpetrated against him.

On March 25, she rejected an application for bail made by Assange's legal team, which detailed the "very real" and potentially "fatal" threat posed to his health by the coronavirus pandemic.

Assange is currently held on remand in London's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison. He faces extradition to the US, where he would be convicted of bogus espionage charges and imprisoned for life for exposing war crimes and human rights abuses by successive US governments.

It was exactly a decade ago that WikiLeaks published the Collateral Murder video. Its images of the indiscriminate murder of unarmed Iraqi civilians and two journalists by US occupation forces were viewed with horror by millions around the world.

Ever since, the US and its allies—including Britain and Australia—have hounded Assange. They are determined to silence him forever as part of their turn to authoritarian rule and the imposition of new military provocations and mass austerity demanded by a criminal financial oligarchy.

Assange's health has been systematically destroyed by a decade of arbitrary detention. Last May, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer found that Assange displayed medically verifiable symptoms of psychological torture resulting from his decade-long persecution.

The WikiLeaks founder has a chronic lung condition that renders him especially vulnerable to respiratory illness, along with a host of other medical issues.

Since last November, the Doctors for Assange group, comprised of over 200 medical professionals around the

world, has warned that Assange may die behind bars because he has been denied adequate medical care. Their calls for him to be transferred to a university teaching hospital have been dismissed by the British authorities.

In an open letter last month, Doctors for Assange wrote: "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."

Speaking for the group, Dr. Stephen Frost told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Mr. Assange must be assumed by doctors to be severely immunocompromised and therefore at greatly increased risk of contracting and dying from coronavirus in any prison, but especially in a prison such as Belmarsh. Every extra day Mr. Assange is incarcerated in Belmarsh prison constitutes an increased threat to his life."

Countless human rights organisations have warned that the UK's prisons are "breeding grounds" for coronavirus. Were Assange to remain in prison, argued defence lawyer Edward Fitzgerald QC two weeks ago, he would be "seriously endangered in circumstances from which he cannot escape."

Judge Baraitser, however, ruled that the "global pandemic... does not provide grounds for Mr. Assange's release." She had "no reason not to trust" the government's advice on protecting prisoners from the virus "as both evidence-based and reliable and appropriate."

When the ruling was given, 19 prisoners across 12 different prisons had already tested positive for the virus and 4,300 prison staff were self-isolating, including one hundred at Belmarsh.

By the time she presided over Assange's hearing yesterday, 107 prisoners were known to be infected across 38 different prisons, meaning the virus is confirmed as present in at least a third of prisons in England and Wales. Another 1,300 prisoners were self-isolating. Of the top three prisons for reported cases, two were in London—Wandsworth with 11 and Thameside, situated immediately next door to Belmarsh, with 7. Nine prisoners were reported to have died after becoming infected, including one inmate at Belmarsh.

Revealing plans to release several thousand low-risk

prisoners late last week, the UK government made the astonishing announcement that because Assange was “not serving a custodial sentence” he would not be considered eligible. Only one conclusion can be drawn: the WikiLeaks founder is being kept in prison with the deliberate intention of exposing him to a deadly disease.

At yesterday’s hearing, Assange’s lawyers requested that the next phase of extradition proceedings, scheduled to begin on May 18, be postponed. They detailed the Orwellian situation facing their client under conditions of a national lockdown.

Fitzgerald explained that Assange’s already minimal contact with his legal team has been restricted even further. His lawyers “are not able to have any reasonable communication with him at present.” They are unable to visit him at all in prison or to meet with him via video and have been able only to hold a few telephone calls with their client. Assange’s defence is therefore now largely being carried out by post, which is insecure and takes weeks to be received.

There is no chance of the extradition hearing being carried out fairly while the epidemic and lockdown restrictions continue, with Assange, witnesses, legal teams, the press and public unable to attend in person.

In any case, Fitzgerald continued, Assange is too ill to participate safely in the proceedings, even virtually. In order to access the video link in Belmarsh, he must move across the prison, queue with others and use shared facilities—all potential opportunities for contracting the coronavirus. Given Assange’s state of health, said Fitzgerald, it would be unjust to make him appear in court in this way.

Baraitser was unmoved, saying she intended to keep to the date of May 18 and hear as much evidence as possible that month, with witnesses participating via video link if necessary.

Not only does the British government refuse to accept the coronavirus pandemic as grounds for bail, they will not let it disrupt the schedule of their show trial. If they don’t succeed in ensuring that Assange dies in prison, no concern for the pretence of fair legal proceedings will prevent them from railroading Assange to a US prison as planned, in what amounts to an extraordinary rendition. In events that outstrip the imagination of Franz Kafka, the whole extradition hearing may be heard *in absentia*, not only of the accused but of his lawyers and witnesses!

Underscoring the utterly vindictive character of the campaign against Assange, Judge Baraitser also insisted on lifting reporting restrictions barring his partner and children being publicly named. The WikiLeaks founder has sought to maintain their anonymity to ensure their safety.

Baraitser cruelly claimed there was “no evidence” that

Assange’s partner would be subject to harassment if her name was revealed or that any US agency wished her or her children harm. She had the gall to claim that her decision was motivated by the “strong public interest” in the “accurate reporting” of the case. As she knows full well, Assange has been slandered and his case wilfully distorted by the corporate media for a decade. Releasing his partner’s name is intended to add fuel to the fire.

These acts of naked criminality are carried out under conditions in which the world’s attention is focussed on the coronavirus pandemic and the criminal responses of the world’s governments. But the effects of the virus cannot be allowed to cover for the escalation of the vicious assault on the most significant journalist of the 21st century.

The coronavirus pandemic has underscored that the public’s access to true and accurate information is a life and death question. In every country, working people are being confronted by governments and corporations that have systematically lied about the implications of a public health emergency that began last December—assisted by a corrupt and pliant media.

Assange founded WikiLeaks to uphold the public’s right to know. He pursued this commitment courageously, earning the enmity of imperialist governments and their political and media lackeys around the world. It is time to repay the debt.

Saturday marks 12 months since Assange was illegally expelled from Ecuador’s London embassy, where he was a political refugee, and brutally arrested by the British police. The events of the past year have unquestionably demonstrated that the purpose of the entire operation against the WikiLeaks founder has been nothing less than his physical and psychological destruction.

The alarm must be sounded: Assange’s life is in imminent danger! His fate depends on the construction of a mass movement of the international working class for his immediate and unconditional release. Join this fight today!



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