

Application for delay in Assange extradition hearing as COVID-19 sweeps through UK prisons

Alice Summers
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Lawyers for imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange will appeal at Westminster Magistrate's Court in London this morning for a delay in the US extradition hearing that is scheduled to resume on May 18.

Due to the risk of infection from COVID-19, Assange will not participate in today's case management hearing—not even by video-link—as transit from his prison cell to the interview room involves contact with both prisoners and staff who may have the virus.

Assange has been held at Belmarsh maximum security prison in south east London for more than one year. He is being held solely on the basis of an extradition request from the United States government over WikiLeaks' publication of classified information exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lawyers for Assange are expected to present evidence that their client's fundamental due process rights, including his right to view evidence and confer with legal counsel, have been drastically curtailed as a result of the pandemic lockdown. International travel restrictions and the risk of infection from coronavirus also mean that key witnesses would be unable to attend proceedings in May.

In a statement issued Friday, WikiLeaks ambassador Joseph Farrell said, "It is quite clear that this hearing cannot go ahead in just a few weeks' time.

"Julian's lawyers cannot prepare adequately, witnesses will not be able to travel, and journalists and the public will not have free, adequate and safe access to the proceedings. Justice will neither be done, nor seen to be done."

At today's case management hearing journalists, and medical and political observers, will be forced to follow proceedings via telephone dial-in. It is not clear how any proceedings can be safely held at Woolwich Crown Court in just a few weeks' time.

On April 8, Assange told journalist Vaughan Smith the virus was "ripping through" Belmarsh prison. So far, at least one prisoner there has died from coronavirus, while unconfirmed reports suggest a second prisoner may also have died from the virus.

As of April 23, 304 prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19 across 69 jails. There are 257 confirmed cases of coronavirus among prison officers, with the Prison Officers Association stating that up to 6,000 prison staff are currently off work due to COVID-19.

Fifteen prisoners and four prison staff who were confirmed to have the virus have so far died.

The coronavirus pandemic is being weaponised by the state to tighten the noose around Assange. He is being kept in prison as the virus spreads uncontrollably throughout the prison system.

On March 25, District Judge Vanessa Baraitser refused to grant Assange bail, rejecting evidence by medical doctors that his continued imprisonment amid the spread of coronavirus presented a "very real" and potentially "fatal" risk to his fragile health.

At the start of April, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) pledged 4,000 prisoners in England and Wales could be released from jail early if they were within two months of completing their sentence for non-violent or non-sexual crimes. Pregnant women or women in mother-and-baby units considered "low-risk" would also be considered for early release, the MoJ claimed.

Shortly after revealing plans to release thousands of prisoners, the UK government made the vindictive announcement that Assange would not be released as he is "not serving a custodial sentence" and so is not eligible under the terms of the legislation.

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. 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.”

On April 16, the early release programme was suspended after six prisoners were mistakenly freed more than two months before the end of their sentence. The prisoners were mostly Category D (the lowest risk) inmates, with some Category C, and all returned to jail “compliantly” when the mistake was realised, according to the MoJ.

By April 23, only around 25–50 prisoners had been freed early, according to BBC Home Affairs Correspondent Danny Shaw.

The vindictive suspension of the programme demonstrates the criminal disregard of the British ruling class for the lives of prisoners. The decision was taken amid reports that more than 50 percent of prisons have at least one confirmed case of coronavirus.

Dita Saliuka, whose brother Liridon died in Belmarsh prison on January 2 while on remand, told the WSWS that conditions inside Belmarsh are appalling. She criticised the government for not ensuring the safety of prisoners and for their treatment of Assange.

“People are dying in their cells [of COVID-19]—why aren’t they in hospital?” she asked. “Prisoners are not safe. I’ve been campaigning since Liridon died, and I already didn’t think conditions at Belmarsh were safe—I am 100 percent sure that they are not now.

“Health care workers have been taken out of prisons to help on the frontline. When the Nightingale [temporary field hospital] was opened in east London, they put Oxleas CEO Matthew Trainer in charge of it. But Oxleas is responsible for the health care at Belmarsh, and it

sounds like Trainer has taken health care workers from Belmarsh on secondment to the Nightingale ...

“We all know how quickly this disease is killing people. It shouldn’t take weeks to release prisoners. They could die the day before they’re scheduled to be released. When this all started happening, it was something like 8,000 prison officers who were off self-isolating, out of 23,000 officers in the UK. In Belmarsh there are about 400 officers, and about 200 were off self-isolating. But Vanessa Baraitser said there were no confirmed cases at Belmarsh! Well why are half of the prison staff self-isolating then? And how many prisoners are self-isolating?”

On April 17, two charities, the Howard League for Penal Reform and the Prison Reform Trust, issued a legal letter to Justice Secretary Robert Buckland—the first stage in taking formal legal action—over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in prisons.

Frances Crook, chief executive of the Howard League, said, “The rate of infection is accelerating, and the window of opportunity to protect people is vanishing. Ministers must rise to this challenge and act immediately to avert a public health catastrophe.”

The Prison Governors’ Association, representing prison staff, has called for the prison population to be reduced by 15,000 in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

In their refusal to grant Assange bail in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government and judiciary are escalating their extra-legal persecution of the WikiLeaks journalist. Workers and youth around the world must demand the immediate release of Assange from prison and the dropping of the Espionage Act charges against him. The fight for Assange’s freedom is inseparable from the defence of the democratic rights of the entire working class against state censorship, repression and war.



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