

Assange extradition hearing rescheduled for September

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition hearing was pushed back to September, in a ruling at Westminster Magistrates Court yesterday morning.

The hearing had been due to begin on May 18, but Assange's legal team appealed for a postponement in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which would prevent Assange, his legal team, and key witnesses from attending the court in person.

The WikiLeaks founder is fighting an extradition request from the United States, seeking life imprisonment for exposing war crimes, torture, and state conspiracies.

Proceedings will be moved out of Woolwich Crown Court, near Belmarsh maximum security prison where Assange is being held, to another Crown Court to accommodate the new schedule. The start date and location will be confirmed on Friday.

September was the month suggested by Assange's defence in their first submission requesting a delay. At last week's hearing, presiding District Judge Vanessa Baraitser had raised the possibility of a bifurcated hearing in July-August, or a single three-week hearing sometime after November. However, neither the prosecution nor the defence were available in the July and August period, and Edward Fitzgerald QC, Assange's defence lead, insisted that "the November date is too late for us."

Nonetheless, the vindictive ruling given by Baraitser in March—and later reiterated by the British government—that Assange will not be released on bail means he now faces an additional four months endangered by the coronavirus epidemic in UK prisons. The danger is highlighted by the fact that Assange has now not attended the last three hearings either in person or by video link due to ill health. It is understood that doctors have advised him not to use the prison's video

link facility to minimise his potential exposure to the virus.

Campaign group Doctors for Assange commented after yesterday's hearing:

"Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, Julian Assange's health and survival in Belmarsh prison was highly precarious.

"Now, with coronavirus in Belmarsh, his history of chronic health difficulties, psychological torture, medical neglect, respiratory issues and inevitably compromised immune system is a deadly medical cocktail.

"He should be released on bail immediately. Given the multiple violations of due process of law in this case, Julian Assange must be freed."

The British state will also continue to obstruct both Assange's ability to conduct his defence and journalists' ability to report on the case in detail. Yesterday's hearing was delayed nearly two hours, with Assange's legal team only informed of the change that morning. Belmarsh prison has used the pandemic to justify restricting Assange's already extremely limited contact with his lawyers even further. By September, he will have spent 18 months in a maximum-security prison on no charges, with strictly limited visits and communication with the outside world and without access to a trusted doctor.

Lauri Love, who successfully defeated a US extradition attempt in 2018, said in a statement, "18 months is longer than I had to wait for my own extradition hearing. It's a horrific legal process to go through under the best conditions. It takes a cumulative toll on your physical and mental health.

"I was able to participate meaningfully in my own defence, which Julian cannot, due to his unnecessary detention in Belmarsh. This has been exacerbated by

restrictions on his access to lawyers and family as a result of the coronavirus.

“We cannot have justice if the process itself becomes a punishment.”

Throughout the lockdown, Westminster Magistrates Court has failed to provide even the most basic access to proceedings to the media. Last week, reporters were given access to an inaudible conference call. Yesterday, they were treated to an hour of hold music while the hearing took place—the clerk failed to unmute the court’s line. The court sent out a statement to a select list of journalists after the hearing with a short summary of the events and outcomes.

Reporters Without Borders tweeted in response, “The court’s failure to facilitate remote monitoring highlights precisely why Julian Assange’s extradition hearing must be postponed until lockdown conditions are lifted. This case is of high public interest and must be open to scrutiny by the press & other observers.”

These failings are part and parcel of the show trial procedures established during the first four days of Assange’s extradition hearing in February. While Assange struggled to hear proceedings in the well of the court and was denied secure and simple communication with his representatives, the majority of journalists were forced to watch proceedings on tiny screens with terrible audio quality in a portacabin outside the court building. There is every chance that the change of venue made necessary by the September date will be used as an opportunity to hold the hearing in a Crown Court even more inaccessible than Belmarsh.

Assange’s supporters must make use of this delay to organise the mass international movement necessary to secure his freedom.



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