

# In letter to the *Lancet*, doctors condemn torture of Assange and demand his release

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More than 200 eminent doctors from around the world have reiterated their call for an end to the psychological torture of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and his immediate release from Britain's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison.

In a letter published in the current edition of the *Lancet*, released this week, the doctors warn that the mistreatment of Assange by the British, US and allied governments has intensified since the coronavirus pandemic began, placing his life in serious danger.

The document is the latest intervention by Doctors for Assange, a group that was established last November to advocate for the WikiLeaks founder to be provided with adequate medical care and for his fundamental rights to be respected.

Over the course of more than six months, they have documented the abuses Assange has been subjected to, contributing to the fight against the attempt to extradite him from Britain to the US where the publisher faces life imprisonment for exposing American war crimes.

Indicating the global reach of the initiative, the letter was signed by doctors from six countries. They included the principal states that have spearheaded the persecution of Assange, the US, Britain, Australia and Sweden, along with Germany and Hong Kong. The authors of the document signed it on behalf of 216 medical colleagues hailing from 33 countries.

Many more doctors will read the letter. The *Lancet* has some 1.8 million subscribers around the world.

The letter begins by recalling the doctors' last letter to the prestigious journal on February 17, in which they demanded "an end to the torture and medical neglect of Julian Assange." In the months since, "no responsible authority" had "acted to end, or even investigate" the violations of Assange's rights.

Instead, the doctors wrote, the "ongoing actions of

the US and the UK, and the inaction of Australia," despite the fact that Assange is a citizen of that country entitled to its protections, had "perpetuated and escalated the campaign of collective persecution and harassment" targeting the WikiLeaks founder.

This had intensified the psychological torture of Assange, first identified more than a year ago by United Nations Rapporteur Nils Melzer and two medical professionals who accompanied him during a May, 2019 consultation in Belmarsh Prison.

The violations of Assange's rights extended to the actions of the British judiciary. The doctors' noted that Assange was effectively prevented from participating in the first week of extradition hearings late last February, being placed in a bullet-proof glass box at the back of the court-room. He was also repeatedly handcuffed, strip-searched and had his legal documents confiscated by prison officials.

The pattern had continued at procedural hearings since. The doctors report that, amid COVID-19 measures in Britain's prisons, Assange has only been able to take part in one of the last five hearings relating to his case. In the lead-up to the final extradition hearings in September, Assange has been unable to meet with his legal team due lockdown measures.

The doctors condemn the refusal of the British government and Judge Vanessa Baraitser to release Assange from Belmarsh Prison during the pandemic. They note that as a result of a chronic lung condition, along with the decade of psychological torture he has endured, there is a "high likelihood" that Assange's immune system is "severely compromised." This increases the danger that he will contract COVID-19, which has spread rapidly through British penitentiaries, and succumb to it.

The doctors write, moreover, that "Mr Assange is non-

violent, he is being held on remand, he is not serving a sentence for a crime, and he is being arbitrarily detained according to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.” This renders him eligible for release during the pandemic, based on guidelines from authoritative international rights organisations.

Despite this, the WikiLeaks publisher remains incarcerated in a maximum-security prison, where he is in isolation at least 23 hours a day. In addition to the medical dangers, the doctors write that “As a person incarcerated solely for publishing activity, continuing to hold Mr Assange under these conditions represents the torture of a publisher and journalist.”

Significantly, they place this treatment in the context of a broader assault on press freedom, including during the mass global demonstrations triggered by the US police murder of George Floyd beginning last month. “In the context of attacks against and arrests of journalists at the recent global protests, his treatment and the precedent it sets are of international concern,” the doctors stated.

The document takes note of growing concern over Assange’s plight, expressed by human rights organisations. It concludes with a call to action, citing Professor Leonard Rubenstein, of the John Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics who stresses that “the medical community as a whole needs to speak out far more forcefully against torture.”

The doctors declare: “We have a professional and ethical duty to speak out against torture, report past torture, to stop present torture and to prevent future torture. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have recently warned that silence on Mr Assange’s torture may well facilitate his death. The silence must be broken.”

In an accompany press release, Lissa Johnson, a leading member of Doctors for Assange, explained that “Under the Convention Against Torture those acting in official capacities can be held complicit and accountable not only for perpetration of torture, but for their silent acquiescence and consent.”

Bill Hogan, a US doctor, told the WSWS: “The UN Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer clearly identified abuses of legal process as the primary instrument of Assange’s torture.”

Asked about a new indictment of Assange, released by the US Department of Justice yesterday, Hogan

stated: “The superceding indictment is the latest in this string of abuses and has the likely result of intensifying the torture of Assange. The indictment dates to well-known events of 2012 and relies on wholly unreliable witnesses.”

Hogan stressed that “Torture is anathema to medical ethics. It can never serve any positive social outcome and it always unjustly degrades the humanity of its victims. The only way torture propagates is when people and their leaders and institutions enable it through silence. Because silence is complicity, we have to speak out as doctors. Our silence goes directly against our core value of ‘do no harm.’”

A copy of the letter has been forwarded to the UK Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice Robert Buckland. The British government has previously refused to answer correspondence from Doctors for Assange, and has blithely dismissed Melzer’s finding that it bears responsibility for the WikiLeaks founder’s psychological torture.



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