Assange faces a fate “worse than death” in US prisons, witnesses tell court

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In Julian Assange’s extradition hearing yesterday, witnesses established the hellish prison conditions in which the WikiLeaks founder would be held if sent to the United States.

The court heard from Yancey Ellis, a defence attorney in Virginia with several years’ experience as a public defender, and Joel Sickler, who has worked in the US in the field of sentencing and prisoner advocacy for four decades.

Ellis testified to conditions in the Alexandria Detention Centre (ADC) based on his experience visiting the facility and speaking with clients held there. The defence say Assange will be detained in the ADC prior to a trial in the US and the prosecution accept this is “likely.”

Both Sickler and Ellis believe Assange would be held in the administrative segregation unit (or X block) of the jail. They described the cells in this unit as “very small”, roughly “eight by ten [foot]” or “the size of a parking space”. Ellis explained that a cell includes a “shelf with a mat on top that is the sleeping space… a small metal toilet and sink and not much else.”

Inmates in administrative segregation are cut off from contact with other prisoners, spending at least “22 hours in the cell,” according to Ellis. “The schedule is about two hours outside of the cell on a daily basis and I say about two hours because oftentimes that second hour, to fit with the jail’s schedule, can be at very odd hours… in the middle of the night” meaning prisoners decline to take it. These breaks are taken alone, “never… with another inmate.” “You’re twiddling your thumbs,” said Sickler, “You’ll have access to reading material but otherwise your whole world is the four corners of that room.”

Communicating with other inmates in nearby cells is impossible. Ellis described trying to conduct conversations with his clients through the steel doors and said, “you almost have to scream at the top of your lungs,” even when standing several inches away. US prosecutor Gordon Kromberg, who will not be cross-examined, states in his written evidence to the hearing that prisoners in the ADC X block can talk to each other through the doors and windows. Ellis said this claim sounded “almost like they’ve never tried it or they’re not familiar with the setting in which the X block is located.”

In Ellis’s view, this regime would “qualify as solitary confinement” even aside from the imposition of special administrative measures (SAMs) on Assange, which he said would “impose conditions on top of what I’m already speaking to.”

Sickler explained what Assange would likely face under SAMs, detained at ADX Florence in Colorado, which he believes to be the WikiLeaks founder’s most likely destination if convicted.

Assange would have no association with other prisoners and “extraordinarily limited” contact with the outside world, just a “monitored” 15-minute phone call with his family once a month. One of the ADX’s former wardens, Sickler noted, described the facility as “worse than death.” Sickler also said the Bureau of Prisons does not set an upper limit for the amount of time prisoners can spend in isolation, telling the court that one man with mental illness spent 29 years in the ADX and that one of his clients has spent over 20 years in isolation conditions “with no end in sight.”

Access to medical care in the ADC and the ADX, both witnesses stated, would be seriously inadequate. Describing the ADC, Ellis said, “It’s very limited…the jail doesn’t employ a doctor and the contractor that they use to provide many of their medical services I believe gives part-time access to a psychiatrist.” Some

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of his clients “wouldn’t see a psychiatrist for several weeks.” He referenced Chelsea Manning’s attempt at suicide in the same facility earlier this year.

Sickler agreed there was a “significant risk” Assange would not get the care he needs. Referring to a statement on medical care in US prisons given by prosecution witness Alison Leukefeld, who will also not be cross-examined, Sickler stated, “I’ve read Mrs Leukefeld’s affidavit and it all sounds great on paper but in practice it’s another story.”

There is no realistic chance of improving these conditions by legal appeal. Ellis said of the ADC, “The courts will defer to the jail on how they house inmates and how they secure the facility so… I don’t think the court would interfere with that.”

Answering a question about the prospects of appealing against SAMs, Sickler told the court he expected any appeal would be “summarily denied.” “It’s a well-known fact here with our federal prison system that even the most minor of administrative remedy appeals filed by the inmates are denied. I’ve filed probably a thousand or more, winning maybe a dozen at most…” Referring to the evidence of defence expert Maureen Baird, a former Bureau of Prisons employee, he concluded, “It’s a feudal system is what she said, and I agree with that.”

The prosecution responded to this evidence with the sinister argument, repeated throughout this hearing, that since the defence witnesses are not employed by the US government or prison system, they are not “in a position to dispute” the statements of US prosecutors.

Behind this veil, they constructed a fantasy world in which the fair treatment of inmates is guaranteed and the Attorney General, whose responsibility it is, may decide not to impose SAMs on Assange. At one point, prosecution lawyer Claire Dobbin said, “SAMs can only be issued at the request of the Attorney General and that requires written certification by the head of the member agencies of the United States intelligence community… So it’s entirely speculative [whether they are applied to Assange] isn’t it?”

It takes no “speculation” to point out that this “intelligence community” launched an international manhunt against Assange including a financial blockade of WikiLeaks, a US investigation staffed by hundreds of officials from every security service, an Interpol Red Notice issued by Sweden for a manufactured sexual assault investigation, and Assange being arbitrarily detained in the Ecuadorian embassy in London for seven years, spied on, illegally seized from the embassy and detained in a maximum security prison without bail for one and a half years.

Nor is it “speculation” that this was done in the interests of a ruling class which has labeled WikiLeaks a “non-state hostile intelligence service” (Secretary of State Mike Pompeo) and Assange a “high-tech terrorist” (Democratic Party presidential candidate Joe Biden) and “enemy combatant” (former Republican Speaker Newt Gingrich), and called for his shooting (former Democratic Party strategist Bob Beckel), hanging (Fox News anchor Bill O’Reilly) and drone assassination (Hillary Clinton).

No amount of lame denials can hide the fact that if Assange is put in the clutches of these people, he will be disappeared into the darkest corner of the US prison system.

Speaking outside the Old Bailey, Julian Assange’s father John Shipton summed up the day’s proceedings, “The prosecution spent all day trying to prove that [ADX Florence Colorado] was like a country club… That if you had a tummy ache, you’d get pills, and if you had a headache, you’d have a psychologist. Just always keep in mind that what this is about is trying to disguise war crimes… so that they can continue to commit them against us, just ordinary people.”

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