

# Migrant friend to Julian Assange dies in UK's Belmarsh prison

Thomas Scripps  
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On Monday last week, Stella Moris, partner of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange who is currently held on remand in Belmarsh maximum security prison pending possible extradition to the United States, reported the suicide of his friend Manoel Santos. She tweeted: “Spoke to Julian. A friend of his killed himself in the early hours of this morning. His body is still in the cell on Julian's wing. Julian is devastated... He'd lived in UK for 20 years. The Home Office served him with a deportation notice to Brazil.”

The prisons watchdog is conducting an investigation into the death.

Santos's fate highlights the utter disregard for democratic rights in the British ruling class. In Assange's extradition hearing this September-October, multiple medical experts testified that his continued imprisonment in Belmarsh, upheld by the courts, posed a serious threat to his life. Professor Michael Kopelman, Emeritus Professor of Neuropsychiatry at Kings College London, said Assange was at a “very high risk of suicide.” The tragic death of Santos has proved these fears are well-founded.

The suicide has drawn attention to the UK government's criminal practice of holding people facing deportation in prisons, even in maximum security institutions. Legal charity Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) explained in a press statement in response to the news:

“Immigration detention is inherently harmful, and those held in prison face additional disadvantages that are worsening due to repressive lockdown regimes which essentially amount to solitary confinement. One of our clients recently told us, in great distress, that he is locked in his cell for 24 hours a day and is only allowed one shower per week. Access to immigration legal advice and representation has always been almost impossible in prison but under COVID-19 restrictions, people are prevented from challenging their detention or appealing their deportation because legal visits are no longer possible. No-one should endure such suffering.

“Many of our clients held in prisons have pre-existing mental health conditions which make such treatment

particularly problematic. We fear that more people may die by suicide if this treatment continues.”

Speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site*, BID Director Celia Clarke said, “If you are in prison and have completed your prison sentence but are served with two official papers—one saying you are facing deportation and have 14 days in which to give the Home Office reasons why you shouldn't be deported; and the second paper saying that you are now detained in the same prison you have served your sentence, but under immigration powers—and you have no lawyer, then that's pretty fatal.”

As of May this year, there were 340 people held in prisons under immigration powers. Figures from December 2018 show 31 people were held in maximum-security prisons.

Under the UK Borders Act 2007, brought in by Gordon Brown's Labour government, any non-British citizen faces automatic deportation after receiving a criminal sentence of 12 months or longer. “The decision to detain someone is taken by an official... not a court,” Clarke pointed out, stressing the lack of any proper legal procedure or oversight.

Convictions which could lead to deportation include relatively minor drug offences and even shoplifting—returning Britain to the brutality of the Victorian era where people accused of stealing a loaf of bread were transported to the colonies. Many “foreign nationals” are not aware that they are technically not British citizens or are not informed that a one-year sentence could see them deported, meaning some plead guilty without knowledge of the terrible consequences.

From the New Year, the government intends to make rough sleeping grounds for deportation, heralding a mass round-up of the homeless—more than a quarter are believed to be “foreign nationals”.

“You should also remember,” Clarke said, “that many of these so-called ‘foreign national offenders’ are people who have either been born or brought up in this country but did not become British citizens for a variety of reasons such as: cost of becoming a citizen; lack of knowledge; being in care, etc.” Many of BID's clients have partners and children in

the UK.

Clarke described the situation facing potential deportees with regard to access to their legal rights as “Abject. There is no legal aid for deportation and immigration cases. The best that anyone can hope for is to apply for ‘exceptional case funding’ but the application process is complicated and most ordinary people would be unable to do it, let alone anyone with a health condition, language or literacy difficulties.”

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, passed by David Cameron’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, excluded deportation cases from legal aid eligibility.

Those facing administrative removal after being refused asylum formally retain access to legal aid and appeals, but these rights are regularly denied in practice by the government. Research by immigration rights group Movement for Justice found that asylum-seekers detained at the notorious Yarl’s Wood detention camp had spent five to seven days in the facility without access to a solicitor. Some were given a list of numbers for solicitors but language barriers and problems with phone credit made securing representation practically impossible.

Detainees were then moved to asylum accommodation centres where, in many cases, there were no phones and local legal aid immigration solicitors and charities were overloaded. The charity Care4Calais is operating in 30 asylum hostels in the UK and reports that around 90 percent of occupants either do not know they need a lawyer or have no knowledge of how to get one.

Records seen by Movement for Justice show that when screening asylum-seekers, the Home Office routinely does not ask “questions about torture, trafficking and family in the UK,” when answers might provide a legal mandate to provide asylum. More than half of those interviewed by Movement for Justice said they had been the victims of torture or trafficking, including being enslaved in Libya.

To cut off even this line of appeal, a planned “Fair Borders Bill” will see the government set its own limits on what constitutes “inhuman” or “degrading” treatment or punishment, under Article Three of the European Convention on Human Rights.

This abrogation of fundamental legal protections builds on years of anti-migrant rhetoric and legislation from both the Labour and the Conservative parties. It is underpinned by the global turn to far-right nationalism and xenophobia, epitomised by the Brexit agenda in the UK, but also evident in the Fortress Europe policies of the European Union (EU).

Under its “Asylum and Migration Pact” unveiled this year, the EU plans to establish “screening processes” at its border which effectively abolish the right to asylum. Britain and the

EU have deployed militarised naval forces against migrant vessels, in the English Channel and the Mediterranean, and allowed these waters to become graveyards for desperate families and children. Asylum-seekers are held in deplorable conditions across the continent, with plans in Britain for their detention on disused ferries or oil rigs, or on remote islands.

To support these actions, the Conservative government has carried out fascist agitation against migrants and lawyers who represent them. UK Home Secretary Priti Patel has repeatedly denounced “activist” and “lefty lawyers”, to the delight of the right-wing press and the far-right organisations terrorising asylum hostels.

Responding to Patel’s statements, Clarke said, “It’s is completely irresponsible and utterly reprehensible. There has already been an attack on a solicitors’ firm by a knife-wielding individual who was found with Nazi and fascist literature. Despite knowing that the attack had taken place, Priti Patel repeated her comments, echoed by Boris Johnson at the Conservative party conference.”

Clarke was referring to the case of Cavan Medlock, accused of planning to kill a Duncan Lewis Solicitors lawyer. Medlock arrived at the firm’s offices armed with a knife and handcuffs, carrying Nazi and Confederate flags.

Laws for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees, and the right to be free of inhuman and degrading treatment, were a direct response to the popular outrage generated by the horrors of the Second World War. In her Conservative Party conference speech this October, Patel derided these “grand theories about human rights”, on which she refused to be “lectured”. Through its treatment of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers—and of the journalist and publisher Assange, whose work exposed the imperialist crimes that caused so many millions to flee their homes—the British ruling class is returning to the worst barbarism of the twentieth century.



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