

Assange's life in danger as major COVID-19 outbreak hits Belmarsh Prison

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Reports from Julian Assange's closest relatives have confirmed that the British state is playing Russian roulette with the imprisoned WikiLeaks founder's life. The authorities are exposing him to the danger of COVID-19 infection even though leading medical experts have warned that he would be at a high risk of succumbing to the virus as a result of a chronic lung condition, and a host of other medical issues.

Last week, WikiLeaks announced that Assange and all other inmates in his house block at London's Belmarsh Prison had been placed under an indefinite lockdown, triggered by the discovery of at least three COVID-19 cases. In addition to detaining prisoners in their cells 24 hours a day, Belmarsh authorities began a mass testing program.

The results, as they have been reported to prisoners, show an outbreak that is out of control.

This morning, Stella Moris, Assange's partner, wrote on Twitter: "Today I've been told the number of people infected with #COVID on Julian's house block is 56, including staff."

The breakdown of cases, between inmates and staff, remains unclear, but a previous post by Moris yesterday indicated that the vast majority of infections were among prisoners.

Moris noted that there are fewer than 200 inmates in House Block One, indicating an infection rate of more than 25 percent. If the cases are confined to Assange's wing, where there are just 70 inmates, the proportion of infected prisoners could be as high as 70 percent.

The figures suggest widespread transmission within the block. Throughout the pandemic, prisons have acted as virtual incubators of the virus. The inherent risks of a large population in continuous close confinement have been compounded by overcrowding, poor ventilation, the rundown state of the penitentiaries and the failure of the authorities to take any but the most minimal precautions against COVID-19.

The outbreak in Belmarsh coincides with a major increase in cases across the British prison system. Official figures

from the Ministry of Justice revealed more than 600 infections from the end of September to the end of October. Since March, there have been some 1,600 confirmed cases and at least 32 deaths.

In addition to the willful negligence of exposing tens of thousands of prisoners, most of them poor and working class, to a potentially deadly virus, there is a specific political criminality in the prison's treatment of Assange.

He is being detained in a maximum-security prison, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of any offense.

Assange's detention is solely to facilitate proceedings from his extradition to the US, where the WikiLeaks founder faces 17 Espionage Act charges and 175-years imprisonment, for publishing true and newsworthy documents exposing war crimes, human rights abuses and political intrigues affecting millions of people.

The attempted American prosecution has been condemned as a frontal assault on civil liberties by dozens of rights' groups, as a violation of international law by hundreds of legal experts, and an attempt to overturn the First Amendment of the American Constitution, which protects freedom of the press.

As the WikiLeaks founder's mother Christine Assange bluntly stated on Twitter yesterday: "If my son dies from #Covid19 it will be murder!" She outlined the refusal of the authorities to heed warnings of Assange's precarious health and the British judiciary's dismissal of an emergency bail application in March.

Christine Assange also alleged that "Belmarsh is putting all its Covid cases on his wing." This claim, though difficult to verify, dovetails with reports in August that Assange had not been provided with a mask, the most basic form of protective equipment, since the pandemic began. The picture that emerges is of a deliberate attempt to kill the WikiLeaks founder, running in parallel to the bid to imprison him for life for lawful publishing activities.

The flagrant illegality of this operation was further underscored by the release yesterday of a statement by

medical experts, organised in the Doctors for Assange group, demanding the WikiLeaks founder's immediate release.

The document began by noting that it was exactly a year since Doctors for Assange had first publicly warned of the dangers to Assange's health and demanded his removal from Belmarsh. In that time, the number of medical experts supporting the initiative has grown from 65 doctors to more than 350 from all over the world.

The statement declared: "[O]ne year on, the torture and medical neglect of Mr Assange not only continues unabated but has intensified. He remains arbitrarily deprived of his liberty in Belmarsh prison, as determined by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, imprisoned for journalistic activity that was legal when and where it occurred and remains so. He has been found to be at risk of dying and a victim of psychological torture by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture."

The document outlined the risks to Assange from the COVID-19 pandemic, physical ailments, including osteoporosis, and acute psychological issues stemming from his decade-long persecution, which have resulted in extended periods of serious depression and suicidal ideations.

The statement concluded: "Doctors for Assange joins the world's leading human rights and press freedom authorities in calling for Julian Assange's freedom from imprisonment and extradition over publishing activity. At a minimum, Julian Assange must be urgently released to home detention for medical reasons, consistent with his human right to life and health, and in line with the inviolable medical obligation to do no harm."

In addition to indicting the British government for jeopardising Assange's life, the statement condemned the Australian government for refusing to intervene in his defence, despite the fact that the WikiLeaks publisher is an Australian citizen and journalist.

All of the official parties in Britain, Australia and the US are implicated in the campaign against Assange and have supported, either directly or tacitly, his persecution in line with their backing for imperialist war.

The current dangers also highlight the criminal role of the corporate media. The first reports of the Belmarsh outbreak last week occasioned only the most cursory articles in a handful of British and Australian outlets. Moris's statements over the past two days about the extent of the infections in Assange's wing have, to date, not been reported by a single publication of the media establishments.

The complete indifference of the "fourth estate" to a journalist and political prisoner being jailed without charge, and willfully exposed to a deadly pandemic, epitomises the

character of the press as an adjunct of governments and the intelligence agencies. Though it is occurring in Britain, the treatment of Assange would not be out of place in the most despotic of dictatorships, where political dissidents are thrown behind bars and their plight hidden by a state-controlled media.

It is also noteworthy that despite the explosion of coronavirus infections in the penitentiary system, a Google News search for "Britain prisons coronavirus" returns just two articles devoted to the issue over the past several weeks, both from the right-wing *Daily Mail*.

The official "liberal press," including publications such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, have only referenced the mass outbreaks behind bars in passing.

The hostility of the upper middle-class editors to Assange and democratic rights, and their disinterest in the conditions facing the most oppressed layers of the population, go hand in hand.

The plight of prisoners parallels the situation confronting the working class as a whole. Millions have been imperilled by the homicidal policies of "herd immunity," adopted by governments intent on ensuring continued capitalist exploitation and corporate profit-making, even if it results in mass infections and deaths.

The dangers confronting Assange, and the refusal of any section of the political and media establishment to defend him, again demonstrates that the fight for his freedom is dependent on the development of an independent political movement of the working class. The demand for Assange's immediate release should be taken up by workers in Britain and internationally who are entering into struggle against the same governments that are seeking to destroy the courageous journalist and publisher.



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