

Medical doctors respond to Assange extradition ruling: “He must be released without delay”

Our reporters
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Doctors in the UK, Australia and the United States are calling for the immediate release of Julian Assange from prison after Monday’s court ruling blocked his extradition to the US on health grounds.

Members of the Doctors for Assange campaign group have warned that the WikiLeaks founder is not safe while US Espionage Act charges against him remain.

Dr Stephen Frost is a well-known specialist in diagnostic radiology based in the UK who founded Doctors for Assange in November, 2019. He said that Monday’s court decision confirmed the group’s warnings about Assange’s fragile health after a decade of state persecution and “psychological torture.”

Dr Frost told the WSWs that “The aim of Doctors for Assange was to focus the world’s attention on the medical neglect and prolonged psychological torture of Julian Assange that was reported by United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Professor Nils Melzer, in April 2019.

“Under international law, torture is absolutely prohibited in all circumstances. There are no exceptions. That five states—the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden and Ecuador—conspired to torture a single human being in the centre of London is therefore beyond belief and must never be allowed to happen again.

“Julian Assange needs emergency medical assessment and treatment. Following Monday’s judgement, he must be released without delay. It should not be forgotten that the reason cited by Judge Baraitser for not allowing the extradition—Julian Assange’s poor mental health—resulted directly from the aforementioned psychological torture. Those responsible for and complicit in that inexcusable torture should be held to account, not least because they clearly thought that they were above the law.

“Torture is indelible and inerasable, and in the case of Julian Assange has led to serious psychotic symptoms, namely ‘auditory hallucinations’ which are ‘derogatory and persecutory’ in nature. Such hallucinations, in combination with suicidal ideation, would be a potent and impermissible combination in a US supermax prison. Indeed it has been reckless in the extreme that he has been left to languish untreated in Belmarsh prison with such serious symptoms.”

Dr Sue Wareham, a retired general practitioner from Australia who has campaigned against militarism and war, said that the verdict was “very pleasing. It was the right decision that Assange not be extradited because of the suicide risk, but it is appalling that his mental health has been allowed to deteriorate to that point. It needs to be addressed. He must be provided with adequate medical care, which he has not

been to date.

“The verdict is good, but there are important aspects which need attention. The US charges need to be dropped completely, because they are an attack on his rights and on our right to know, especially in war time. It is very troubling that the judge in the UK basically accepted what the US was saying regarding the need to prosecute Assange for his publishing activities. This is an attack on press freedom, there is no getting around it.

“The role of our government has been very disappointing. They have essentially washed their hands of Assange. They claim that they are giving consular assistance, but we have not seen any evidence of that, either in terms of representations for him to receive adequate medical care or to have the US charges withdrawn.

“This fits with a pattern of the Australian government seeking to silence dissent. David McBride, one of the first to expose Australian war crimes in Afghanistan, which have now been the subject of an official inquiry, faces prosecution himself. It is absurd and farcical. Others, including Bernard Collaery and Witness K are being tried in secret on ‘national security’ charges. It makes you deeply worried about the direction of Australian society.

“The Australian government has not stepped in to defend Assange. On the contrary it is doing the same sort of thing that the US is attempting in his case, in terms of prosecuting those who report the truth. It is very troubling.”

Dr Lissa Johnson, a clinical psychologist from Australia, said: “The judge hearing Julian Assange’s extradition case made the right decision to deny extradition under section 91 of the 2003 Extradition Act, on the grounds that the inhumane and brutal conditions in US prisons would likely prove psychologically fatal for Julian Assange. This is a welcome ruling, and an enormous relief, not to mention an indictment of the US prison system.

“However, the remainder of the judgement served to simultaneously criminalise national security reporting, deny journalists a public interest defence, expose journalists to charges of espionage, green-light extradition on political grounds and uphold numerous falsehoods about Julian Assange’s case. It is also a tragic irony that the devastating psychological impact of 10 years of persecution, psychological torture and medical neglect is the only thing protecting Julian Assange from extradition now. All told, although extradition was denied, the chilling effect on investigative journalism and national security reporting remains intact.

“Whether the ruling reflects a genuine concern for Julian Assange’s welfare will become clear once the bail hearing is complete. Given the

official acknowledgement of his psychological status, Julian Assange must be urgently released on bail while the US appeals the UK court's decision. Anything less would make a mockery of Monday's judgement."

Dr William Hogan, Director of the Division of Biomedical Informatics at University of Florida spoke to the WWS about his initial response to Monday's ruling:

"The first thing is relief. I didn't expect the judge to deny extradition. That she did so at all is a positive development. The grounds on which she denied extradition, being his mental health, speaks to what Doctors for Assange has been campaigning for all along. She affirmed in large part what we've been talking about in terms of his mental health. However, he is still in the conditions that Nils Melzer identified as essentially causative of his psychological torture.

"He is still not completely out of legal jeopardy because the US is going to appeal this decision. So, our position is that as long as he's in prison, as long as the US is still legally persecuting him, the conditions of his psychological torture still exist. We demand that all legal proceedings be dropped and that he be released from prison, and only then will his psychological torture finally end."

WWS: Could you elaborate on the fears about Assange's health?

WH: We have been concerned about his mental health and his risk of suicide. That's been confirmed by the expert testimony. Even the district judge was overwhelmingly convinced by the defence witness [Dr Michael] Kopelman. He's at serious risk of suicide. He is also still at high risk because of COVID. We insist and demand again that he be released on bail for the exact two major reasons that we demanded bail for Assange back in March and decried the judge's denial of bail back then: psychological torture and ongoing damage to his mental health and risk to life, both from psychological health and torture, and COVID.

WWS: You were the lead author of a letter to the *Lancet* in June 2020, "The ongoing torture and medical neglect of Julian Assange." Why did you and other medical professionals take this step?

WH: We were alarmed at the way Assange was treated in the first phase of his extradition hearing. Everything from reports about his treatment in the prison, to reports from the extradition hearing—the glass box episode, the European Court of Human Rights said similar glass boxes [in which Assange was held during the extradition hearing at Woolwich Crown Court] were a violation of human rights—to the reports of him being strip-searched, hand-cuffed and moved throughout Belmarsh Prison... If you talk to people from totalitarian countries, these are classic torture tactics.

We were horrified by his treatment, and then the pandemic came out on top of that. We were extremely fearful for his life, and we had to do something. We wrote the second letter [an earlier letter from Doctors for Assange had been published in the *Lancet* in February 2020] and fortunately the editor of the *Lancet*, Richard Horton, was sympathetic to our second plea. We didn't plan for it to come out the day before International Torture Victims Day, but it was fortuitous and coincidental that that happened.

WWS: What has been the response of medical professionals to the issues taken up by Doctors for Assange?

WH: The World Psychiatric Association issued a tweet on Monday that was supportive of Assange. We have probably doubled or tripled our membership since the initial *Lancet* letter last February, but the major medical associations have all been disturbingly silent—the American Medical Association, the British Medical Association, even

the World Medical Association—which prided itself for standing up against torture in World War II, and the 1960s, it's fallen completely flat on this issue and has said nothing about Assange. I think they're afraid to speak out.

The other thing I think is that the smear tactics have worked. Nils Melzer describes when he was contacted by Dr Sondra Crosby, he was fully expecting to dispel any notion that Assange had been tortured and was shocked when he found otherwise. And as he subsequently investigated the case, he found that he himself had been deceived by the smears. So, I think a lot of the medical community is just not aware of the facts.

The most cherished principles of the medical profession are at stake here. We are against torture. What happened in World War II in Nazi Germany shocked the world—that the medical profession was a participant in the horrors of that regime. It's totally against medical ethics what's happening here. We are supposed to do only things that are good and for the benefit of our patients, and we should speak out when we see injustices and torture like this. We should oppose it in unity and with a loud voice.

WWS: Assange's extradition hearings have coincided with a pandemic that has claimed the lives of more than 1.7 million people. As well as showing the critical role of doctors, the general public has been denied access to accurate information. Do you have any observations to make about this, especially in relationship to the attack on WikiLeaks?

WH: The most important thing we need is trustworthy information—medical information, but also information about what our governments are doing in response. Even just the logistics of how many vaccines are going where, and when, and what the hold-ups are. And the mainstream media is not trustworthy, so there's lots of uncertainty and mistrust in official sources of information. And then you have WikiLeaks that has a perfect track record with no history of retractions. We need that voice of WikiLeaks to expose the fraudsters and the government cover-ups. It's a tragedy that we're missing that in this pandemic.

WWS: What do you think of the role of the WWS in defence of Assange and the role it has played throughout the pandemic?

WH: It's been an essential voice advocating for life, number one. People over profits. It's a bit of an over-used rallying cry, but boy, it brings it into stark relief when we're forcing delivery workers, bus drivers, train conductors, meat packing employees, the working class, to risk their lives to maintain profits for the corporations by going to work during a pandemic.

The role of the WWS as a voice for life over profits has been critical. The WWS has also been a tireless advocate for human rights and truth in the Assange case, denouncing his persecution and torture.



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