

Official documents expose Australian government's complicity in the torture of Assange

Oscar Grenfell
29 November 2021

Official documents obtained by lawyer Kellie Tranter under a series of freedom of information (FOI) requests have exposed in detail the Australian government's knowledge of, and complicity in, the denial of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange's fundamental legal, democratic and human rights.

The material, collated in a timeline produced by Tranter and featured in a *Grayzone* article by Kit Klarenberg earlier this month, demonstrates that senior Australian officials have repeatedly been apprised, by Assange and others, of his deteriorating medical condition and attacks on his basic rights.

Publicly, however, government ministers, joined by the Labor opposition, continued to insist that all was well with Assange. They have proclaimed their "respect" for the British legal process as it oversees his indefinite detention in a maximum-security prison without charge, and facilitates a US extradition request aimed at locking Assange away for life for the "crime" of exposing illegal US wars, mass surveillance and diplomatic conspiracies.

The cables deal with the period following Assange's brutal arrest by the British police on April 11, 2019. Assange's internationally-recognised status as a political refugee was illegally terminated by the Ecuadorian government, as it cultivated greater ties with the US. The Trump administration immediately unveiled an indictment against the WikiLeaks founder over publishing activities, vindicating his decade-long warnings, and Assange was taken to the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, dubbed Britain's Guantánamo Bay.

The earliest correspondence, from April 2019, details warnings from Assange and his lawyer Gareth Pierce to Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) officials that the WikiLeaks founder's possessions in the embassy were being held by the Ecuadorian authorities.

DFAT would contact the Ecuadorian authorities about this. But upon being advised in May, 2019, that Assange's possessions were "under the authority and jurisdiction of the Judicial System of the Republic of Ecuador," the Australian officials declared they were powerless to intervene. As Assange and WikiLeaks had warned, the possessions, including privileged legal papers, would be turned over to the US as it

was seeking Assange's extradition and prosecution.

Other issues raised by Assange and his lawyers in April 2019 included the tardiness of Belmarsh administration in arranging treatment for a protracted dental issue, and the draconian conditions of Assange's confinement.

On April 18, Pierce wrote to DFAT: "In addition to raising the particular concern about urgent need for him to be seen by a dentist, we would welcome your intervention in relation to the current regime under which he is being held—of isolation in a single cell for 23 hours a day. We are aware that Mr Assange is already affected by the years spent in the Embassy." While DFAT was in repeated contact with Belmarsh, the conditions would remain throughout Assange's almost six-month sentence on trumped-up bail offences.

The most significant documents relate to the sharp deterioration of Assange's health, which began in May 2019 and continued over the following months. Tranter summarises a May 17 DFAT report on a visit by Australian officials to Belmarsh: "Assange expressed concern about surviving the current process and fears that he would die if taken to the United States... Consular officers noticed that he had appeared to have lost weight... Assange stated he had not been able to eat for a long period and was now only eating small amounts of food..."

The following day, on May 18, Assange was moved to Belmarsh medical wing, after a prison review found that he was having difficulty controlling thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

On May 20, there was an entry in Assange's Australian consular file that was entirely redacted when provided to Tranter. On the 30th, an entry cited a WikiLeaks Tweet that day, announcing Assange's transfer to the medical wing and expressing grave concerns for his health. The same day, DFAT officials in Canberra wrote to their colleagues in London: "WikiLeaks has tweeted today that Assange has been moved to the health ward and that it holds 'grave concerns' for his health. Grateful post contact the prison and attempt to ascertain the veracity of the report and obtain an update on his health and well being."

Then, on May 1, United Nations Special Rapporteur on

Torture Nils Melzer issued an explosive report, finding that Assange had been the victim of medically-verifiable psychological torture. Melzer denounced the decade-long persecution of Assange by the US, Britain and Sweden as being responsible for Assange's medical conditions, and condemned a "public mobbing" of the WikiLeaks founder by the major powers and much of the corporate media.

Melzer wrote that Australia was complicit in the psychological torture, given its abandonment of the WikiLeaks founder. He also stated that Assange's ongoing confinement, under draconian conditions and in a maximum-security prison, constituted a continuation of the state torture.

That very day, DFAT published a statement rejecting the finding. "The Australian Government is a staunch defender of human rights and a strong advocate for humane treatment in the course of judicial processes. We are confident that Mr Assange is being treated appropriately in Belmarsh Prison," it declared.

The statement referenced the previous exchanges between Assange, DFAT and Belmarsh authorities over his dental and other issues, declaring that DFAT had "previously raised any health concerns identified with Belmarsh prison authorities and these have been addressed." It noted that inquiries had been made with Belmarsh over the previous day's reports that Assange had been transferred to the medical wing, but "due to the privacy considerations that we extend to all consular clients, we will not disclose further details relating to Mr Assange's physical or mental health."

This was a cynical dodge. The files obtained by Tranter show that from May 30, Australian officials repeatedly contacted Belmarsh for six straight days. Their inquiries were ignored. In other words, when it issued its statement of confidence in the treatment of Assange at Belmarsh, DFAT was being ignored by the prison authorities, who were not providing it with any information on Assange's medical crisis.

Despite the stonewalling, there was no intervention by the Australian government to ascertain Assange's medical condition, or to ensure that he was receiving appropriate treatment.

Over the following months, appeals from Assange's family and lawyers for an Australian government intervention were rejected, including for it to compel Belmarsh to allow an independent medical assessment.

On October 21, 2019, Assange attended a pre-trial court hearing, with observers shocked by his frail appearance and confusion, including in response to basic questions. A DFAT report said nothing about Assange's deterioration.

In its aftermath, Pierce wrote to the Australian High Commission in London, warning of an "impending crisis" of Assange's health. She noted that it "was clear for everyone present in court to observe (and was reported by the majority of press present) that Mr Assange is in shockingly poor condition and that he, a person of high intelligence, is struggling not only to cope but to articulate what he wishes to articulate."

Warnings to the prison regarding Assange's health were being ignored.

On November 1, DFAT officials did meet with Assange. The WikiLeaks founder condemned then Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne for publicly claiming that he was being treated like all other prisoners. According to the consular report on the meeting: "Assange stated he was suffering from sensory deprivation and that he was dying. He said that his psychological state was so bad that his mind was shutting down." In the lead-up to extradition hearings, Assange "said he had no access to a PC, he has no pen and therefore cannot write or do any research to prepare his defence."

Following the visit, however, neither DFAT nor the Australian government sought to alter Assange's conditions in any way. In December, Doctors4Assange group, comprised of hundreds of medical experts, wrote to the Australian government condemning its inaction and demanding it intervene to secure Assange's transfer to a university teaching hospital.

The statement, which was also sent to the Labor Party, went unanswered for months. In March, 2020, a DFAT representative replied to a follow-up from the doctors by expressing confidence that Assange's treatment in Belmarsh was "appropriate;" that he would receive "due process;" and the Australian authorities could do nothing.

The documents obtained by Tranter are themselves a demonstration of what Melzer correctly identified as the Australian government's complicity in the torture of Assange. With its non-reaction to Assange's medical crisis in late 2019, the Australian government and Labor clearly indicated that they would stand by and watch on, even if his persecution resulted in the WikiLeaks' founder's death.

As the WSWS has repeatedly explained, the Australian government has a clear political and legal responsibility to intervene in defence of citizens who are subjected to persecution abroad. Its failure to do so in the Assange case is bound up with the US-Australia alliance, and the Australian ruling elite's own intensifying assault on democratic rights in response to mounting social and political opposition to war, inequality and authoritarianism. The documents show that an Australian government will only uphold its responsibility to intervene in defence of Assange, if it is compelled to do so by a mass movement from below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact