

Doctors call for Julian Assange's immediate release

Our correspondents
23 December 2021

More than 300 doctors and medical professionals from around the world have issued an appeal for the immediate release of Julian Assange from prison in the UK because of the serious deterioration in his health indicated by the stroke he suffered in October during his UK High Court extradition hearing.

On December 22, Doctors for Assange released an open letter, published below, to Australian Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, imploring him to seek the WikiLeaks founder's urgent release on medical grounds. The letter makes that request based on Joyce's recent statements suggesting that the US extradition request against Assange should now be dropped.

That hundreds of doctors have again written, warning of Assange's dire medical situation, underscores the grave dangers he faces as he spends yet another year behind bars with extradition hanging over his head and the prospect of being incarcerated for life on trumped-up US espionage charges.

It must be noted, however, that Joyce's comments were entirely hypocritical. They were designed to head off the mounting popular demand for Assange's freedom, and remained in line with the longstanding refusal of Australian governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, to intervene on behalf of Assange, an Australian citizen.

"I have no power in Britain or US over these matters. I have no standing in the British courts," Joyce stated in his op-ed piece in Nine Media newspapers. That echoed the position of the government itself, which is to "respect the UK legal process," even though the UK High Court's December 10 ruling to clear the way for Assange's extradition is another pseudo-legal travesty by the British judiciary.

The Australian government has restated that stand in response to every previous call by the Doctors for Assange to release him since 2019. Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne reiterated that in a reply on April 24 to an earlier letter by Doctors for Assange asking the government to seek Assange's release because of his dangerously poor health after years of confinement and psychological torture. In that reply, now published by the doctors for the first time as an appendix to their new letter, Payne again contemptuously declared: "Australia has no standing in this process."

In reality, successive Australian governments are directly

responsible for Assange's persecution. Starting with the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government in 2010, they have been centrally involved in a conspiracy with the US, UK and Swedish governments to railroad Assange to jail and hand him over to the US because of WikiLeaks' powerful and widely-read exposures of the atrocities, mass spying and regime-change operations conducted by the US and its allies.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties are continuing to fight for the development of a mass movement in the working class for Assange's liberty as part of the struggle against the entire capitalist economic and social order that is responsible for his incarceration. This week, we held an emergency online public meeting to discuss how to take forward this fight.

Doctors for Assange

Letter to Barnaby Joyce MP, Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, 22 December 2021

Dear Deputy Prime Minister,

We would like to thank you and commend you on your recent statements calling for the US extradition request against Julian Assange to be dropped.

We are a group of over 300 doctors and medical professionals from around the world, concerned about the health of Julian Assange and the health of our democracies. We have been writing to the governments of the UK, Australia and the US since November 2019, warning that Julian Assange is in a fragile state of health as a result of his treatment in the UK pursuant to unprecedented US charges, and that he could die in prison. We have been seeking Mr. Assange's release on urgent medical grounds, as an unconvicted, nonviolent, Australian journalist and publisher incarcerated in a high security UK prison for journalistic activity. Our letters have received widespread media coverage, including in major news outlets worldwide, and our warnings have twice been published in *The Lancet*.

We are writing to you now in light of recent reporting that Mr. Assange has suffered what was described as a mini stroke, exhibiting signs of neurological damage. As concerned doctors, including many residing in Australia, we implore you, as the Australian Deputy Prime Minister, to intervene with the UK

Government to seek Mr. Assange's immediate release on urgent medical grounds.

You raise a crucially important point that Mr. Assange has committed no crime, neither in the UK nor in Australia, where the publications for which he is imprisoned occurred. He is guilty of, and charged with, nothing in the UK. Further, the crimes under the Espionage Act he is charged with committing in the US are political in nature. As citizens, we are alarmed that Mr. Assange's extraterritorial persecution threatens national sovereignty, the rule of law, human rights and press freedom worldwide. As doctors, we are alarmed that the news of Mr Assange's mini stroke, in the context of dramatic physical deterioration, underscores that his incarceration also threatens his health and indeed life.

It is important to note, as we have been warning for two years, that a cardiovascular event, such as stroke, is a foreseeable and preventable outcome of the persecution that Mr. Assange has suffered and continues to suffer. In our first letter to the Australian Government, in December 2019, to ensure that it was appraised of the medical risks to its citizen incarcerated for journalism, we wrote:

(1) Julian Assange's case is a medically complex and precarious one for two key reasons: (1) Mr Assange has been assessed as suffering "all symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture" by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and his medical team; and

(2) Mr Assange's medical status as torture victim is exacerbated by a history of years of medical neglect and fragile health in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

*[Such a case] entails a potentially precarious interaction of psychological and medical factors... Via immunosuppressive and cardiovascular mechanisms, persistently and chronically activated stress physiology causes susceptibility to a range of potentially catastrophic illnesses and diseases, including, but not limited to, cancer and **cardiovascular pathology**.*

To ensure the Australian Government was also appraised of the risks of its own inaction, we wrote:

Should Mr Assange die in a British prison, people will want to know what you, Minister [Payne], did to prevent his death.

(Please see the enclosed Appendices 1-5 for all correspondence with the Australian Government).

Following news that Mr. Assange had suffered a cardiovascular event, under extreme stress on the first day of his High Court hearing, October 27th, we issued a statement (please see Appendix 6), on December 12th, noting that:

This dangerous deterioration of Mr. Assange's health underscores urgent concerns raised by Doctors for Assange over the past two years. Therefore, once again, Doctors for Assange calls for Mr. Assange to be released from prison so he can access consistent, high quality, independent medical care—something which is impossible for him to obtain in Belmarsh prison.

On the High Court upholding the US extradition request

despite Mr. Assange's serious medical deterioration, we wrote:

Assurances that Mr. Assange will not be subjected to harsh prison conditions by the very agency that has been plotting to kidnap and assassinate him are farcical. For the High Court to accept such a ludicrous proposition, describing the assurances as "solemn undertakings offered by one government to another," calls into serious question the independence, impartiality and integrity of the UK judiciary.

Crucially, in its "solemn undertakings," accepted by the High Court, the US Government "retains the power" to impose Special Administrative Measures on Mr. Assange, and to assign him to ADX Florence, two of the harshest, most brutal prison conditions in the US. Both facilities violate the Convention Against Torture, to which Australia is a party, and epitomise the oppressive US prison conditions that formed the basis of the denial of the US extradition request in the first place.

In light of these alarming medical and legal developments, we are writing to you now to ask you to consider the serious state of Mr. Assange's health, and the real possibility that a continuation of his unjustifiable detention in the UK may prove fatal, even before any extradition to the US.

Perhaps our concerns were previously dismissed by your colleagues as hyperbolic. They are not. On the issue of cardiovascular pathology, we have been proven right. We do not wish to be proven right on the issue of Mr. Assange's survival.

We are concerned that Mr. Assange's apparent mini stroke may be the tip of a medical iceberg. Indeed, his symptoms suggest as much. It is therefore imperative that Mr. Assange be released from prison, where his health will otherwise continue to deteriorate further and where his complex medical needs cannot be met, and that he immediately receives independent, high quality medical care.

Accordingly, we implore you, as Deputy Prime Minister, to intervene with the UK Government to seek Mr. Assange's immediate release on urgent medical grounds. We reiterate that he is an Australian citizen, innocent in the eyes of the law, and guilty of and charged with nothing in the UK.

Yours sincerely,

Doctors for Assange

Website: <https://doctorsforassange.org>

Email: info@doctorsforassange.org

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/Doctors4Assange>



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