Julian Assange passes one thousand days in Belmarsh Prison, dubbed “Britain’s Guantanamo Bay”

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Wednesday marks the grim milestone of a thousand days of Julian Assange’s continuous incarceration in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison. In that time, the WikiLeaks publisher and journalist has only left the foreboding prison walls, located on a windswept plain on the bleak outskirts of London, to be brought before British courts that have trampled on his democratic and legal rights.

For 50 weeks, or 350 days, Assange was held on the basis of trumped-up bail offences, dating back to 2012. The charges were completely illegitimate, given that Assange’s application for political asylum had been approved and upheld by the United Nations after they were laid. Since the bail sentence elapsed, the WikiLeaks publisher has been held on remand, convicted of no crime.

His ongoing and indefinite detention serves only to facilitate a US extradition request, aimed at prosecuting Assange for exposing American war crimes, with the charges carrying a maximum-sentence of 175-years imprisonment.

The extradition request is the pseudo-legal figleaf for a US government plot to destroy Assange and WikiLeaks. This has included illegal spying on his communications with lawyers, and, as was revealed late last year, plots to kidnap or assassinate the journalist while he was a political refugee in Ecuador’s London embassy. The US case has been condemned by innumerable civil liberties and human rights organisations as a frontal assault on press freedom and a transparent political prosecution.

Despite all this, the extradition request was allowed by a complicit British High Court last November. Assange faces the prospect of continued indefinite detention in Belmarsh or being put on a plane to be handed over to the US government agencies that plotted his murder. The dire predicament underscores the urgency of building an international movement of the working class to demand Assange’s immediate freedom and the denial of extradition.

Belmarsh was established in 1991, to hold “category A” prisoners accused of violent crimes, including murder, rape and terror offences. The facility was first dubbed Britain’s Guantanamo Bay in the early 2000s, because it was used to detain inmates without charge, indefinitely and in almost total isolation, on the basis of extraordinary anti-terror laws passed after 9/11.

Since then, official and independent reports have documented high levels of violence at the prison, including on the part of staff, and frequent denials of prisoners’ basic rights.

The most recent report based on “unannounced visits” to Belmarsh by the Chief Inspector of Prisons last July and August found a deterioration in conditions on a number of fronts.

Its introduction stated: “The prison had not paid sufficient attention to the growing levels of self-harm and there was not enough oversight or care taken of prisoners at risk of suicide. Urgent action needed to be taken in this area to make sure that these prisoners were kept safe.”

The comment is particularly significant, given Assange’s documented history of medical issues, including suicidal depression, stemming from his decade-long persecution. At least four prisoners had taken their own lives since the previous “unannounced visits” in 2018.

“The 52% of prisoners who were not working were spending 23 hours a day locked in their cells while the education block, gym and library had sat empty and unused for more than a year,” the report stated, in reference to the situation facing the majority of prisoners, including Assange.

In 2018, the Chief Inspector deemed that prisoner safety was “reasonably good,” despite independent reports to the contrary. Even that official judgement has been downgraded in the 2021 report, with “outcomes for prisoners” deemed “not sufficiently good.”

A quarter of prisoners said they felt unsafe. The Inspector found: “The use of force had increased since our last inspection. Staff did not routinely activate body-worn video

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cameras during incidents. Due to the lack of video footage to support staff statements, we could not be assured that the use of force was necessary in all cases."

The report goes on to document other abysmal conditions, including rusted shower blocks and cells and a lack of cleaning products provided to most inmates.

The conditions were graphically documented by Assange's fiance Stella Moris in a Twitter post on new year's eve. It included a minute and a half of audio recorded inside Assange's cell, with a continuous cacophony of agitated shouting and barking dogs, presumably those of the prison guards. Moris captioned the post: "What does New Year's Eve sound like from Julian #Assange's cell in Belmarsh prison? Just like it sounded on Christmas Day and every day since he was imprisoned on 11 April 2019."

Assange's imprisonment has continued unabated, even as United Nations official Nils Melzer found in June 2019 that it constituted a new form of the protracted, state inflicted psychological torture to which he had been subjected over the past decade. For more than two years hundreds of doctors have repeatedly demanded that Assange be released to a university teaching hospital or freed, warning that otherwise he may die in prison. Moris has confirmed that Assange suffered a minor stroke last October. And Belmarsh authorities have repeatedly found Assange to be at risk of self-harm or suicide.

In January 2021, a British Magistrates Court blocked Assange's extradition on narrow medical grounds, finding that it would be oppressive because his health issues, together with the draconian conditions in American prisons, would likely claim his life. It nevertheless denied a bail application, leaving Assange in the appalling conditions of Belmarsh.

At hearings on a US appeal to that verdict, the High Court similarly accepted the medical evidence provided by Assange's defence.

The High Court, however, not only sanctioned Assange's ongoing detention, but upheld the US appeal, allowing extradition, on the basis of fraudulent and self-contradicting "assurances" from the American authorities that the conditions of Assange's imprisonment would not be so bad as claimed by the defence.

Late last month, Assange's lawyers filed an application to appeal that ruling.

In a public statement, Moris explained: "On December 10th, the High Court upheld the Magistrates' Court's assessment, based on the evidence before her, that there was a real risk that, should Julian Assange be extradited to the United States, he would be subjected to near total isolation, including under the regimes of SAMs (Special Administrative Measures) and/or ADX, (administrative maximum prison) and that such isolation would cause his mental condition to deteriorate to such a degree that there was a high risk of suicide. These findings led the lower court to block the extradition under s. 91 of the Extradition Act, which bans "oppressive" extraditions.

"However, the High Court overturned the lower court's decision to block the extradition, based solely on the fact that after the US lost the extradition case on January 4th 2021, the US State Department sent a letter to the UK Foreign Office containing conditional assurances in relation to Julian Assange's placement under SAMs and ADX. The assurances letter explicitly states in points one and four that 'the United States retains the power' to 'impose SAMs' on Mr. Assange and to 'designate Mr. Assange to ADX' should he say or do anything since January 4, 2021 that would cause the US government to determine, in its subjective assessment, that Julian Assange should be placed under SAMs conditions and/or in ADX Florence. These conditional assurances alone were considered sufficient by the High Court to overturn the lower court's decision."

Not only were the assurances conditional, they were also issued by the government that has been exposed to have spied on Assange and plotted his extrajudicial kidnapping or murder. By rights, this evidence alone should have resulted in the extradition application being summarily dismissed.

Assange's persecution, however, is supported by the British authorities, and other US allies, including the Australian government, because it is the spearhead of a broader campaign to suppress widespread anti-war sentiment and to create a precedent for political frame-ups and persecution.

Moris and other prominent Assange supporters have pointed to this broader context in recent days. They have noted the contrast between the knighthood of former British Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, whose government participated in the invasion of Iraq, claiming at least a million lives, and the imprisonment of Assange, who exposed so many of the crimes of that illegal war.

Assange's ongoing detention and the High Court ruling again demonstrate that his freedom can only be won through a political struggle against the entire capitalist establishment. Such a fight must be based in the working class, which is entering into struggle against the very governments spearheading Assange's persecution.

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