

Britain admits to spying on Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson

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On Saturday, renowned international human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson announced a settlement with the British government over its surveillance of her while she has acted as a legal representative of persecuted WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

The same day, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), where a case by Robinson against the British government was pending, took note of the agreement. As part of the settlement, the ECHR said the British government had admitted to violating Robinson's article eight and article ten rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, relating to privacy and freedom of expression respectively.

The settlement is another damning exposure of the criminality of the pursuit of Assange by the US and its allies. It came ahead of the announcement by British Home Secretary Priti Patel, due by Friday, as to whether she will order Assange's extradition to the US, where he faces 17 US Espionage Act charges and 175 years in prison for exposing American war crimes and other US abuses.

Two other damning exposures of the operation against Assange have occurred in recent weeks. Earlier this month, it was revealed that Spain's National High Court has issued a summons for Mike Pompeo to testify as a witness at criminal proceedings related to US-orchestrated spying on Assange and his lawyers, allegedly conducted by the UC Global security firm.

Pompeo, if he answers the summons, is also likely to be questioned about allegations that while he was CIA director and then secretary of state, the US administration of President Donald Trump discussed kidnapping or assassinating Assange while he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy.

And last Friday, more than 300 doctors from around the world issued a statement, warning Patel that

approving Assange's extradition would be "medically and ethically unacceptable."

The Robinson settlement, like these other glaring demonstrations of the criminality of Assange's persecution, has received scant attention in the corporate media. These outlets continue to function as a key mechanism for suppressing information relating to the attacks on Assange's rights, creating the climate in which the abuses continue.

One mainstream publication, the British *Daily Mail*, reported the outcome of the Robinson case. In a statement to the paper, Robinson explained: "The UK Government has now admitted that its surveillance and information-sharing arrangements with the US violated my rights. That includes in relation to the protection of confidential journalistic material."

"This follows a pattern of unlawful spying on Julian Assange and his legal team, and it raises grave concerns about government interference with journalistic material and privilege."

"It also raises serious questions about what information the UK and US governments have been sharing about Mr Assange's case against extradition to the US."

In a follow-up comment on Twitter, Robinson said the exposure of the spying would not have been possible without the courageous actions of American National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden, as well as the journalists who worked with him, such as Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras.

Robinson, who has represented Assange since 2010, also thanked Privacy International, with whom she initiated the joint legal action against the British government in 2016.

In 2013, Snowden revealed mass NSA spying on the

global population, in violation of international law and the American Constitution. He also exposed US surveillance on foreign heads of state and United Nations officials.

Other NSA documents shed light on the US-led conspiracy against Assange, as well as his collaborators.

In a 2014 *Intercept* article, Greenwald and Ryan Gallagher outlined some of these revelations. As they noted, the documents implicated not only the NSA and other American government agencies in the pursuit of Assange, but also the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which was collaborating closely with its US counterparts in a dragnet targeting WikiLeaks supporters.

The *Intercept* reported that GCHQ, the British electronic spying agency, had “used its surveillance system to secretly monitor visitors to a WikiLeaks site. By exploiting its ability to tap into the fiber-optic cables that make up the backbone of the internet, the agency confided to allies in 2012, it was able to collect the IP addresses of visitors in real time, as well as the search terms that visitors used to reach the site from search engines like Google.”

The British collaboration in the pursuit of Assange was stepped up in August 2010, when the Obama administration issued an appeal to its allies to help concoct criminal charges against the WikiLeaks founder. That was retaliation for WikiLeaks’ publication of the leaked US army documents, revealing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, for which Assange currently faces extradition to the US.

The British authorities worked with the US, as the NSA placed Assange on a secret “manhunt” list, and devised a plan to extensively surveil and harass his supporters.

In one example of this collaboration, in 2012 Robinson was initially blocked from checking into a London-to-Australia flight because she had been placed on an “inhibited” travel ban list.

The British role in the pursuit of Assange has continued for more than a decade. The UK authorities played the crucial role in ensuring that Assange could not leave the Ecuadorian embassy to take asylum abroad. In 2016, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that this amounted to arbitrary and unlawful detention of Assange.

In April 2019, the British police illegally arrested Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy, to facilitate the US extradition request. This has been followed by over three years of detention in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, most of that time without charge, and a host of judicial abuses of Assange’s legal and democratic rights, aimed at facilitating the US rendition.

The British government’s acknowledgment that it unlawfully surveilled Robinson again demonstrates that the persecution of Assange is the spearhead of a broader campaign against anti-war journalists and activists, principled lawyers and anyone who obstructs the anti-democratic and militarist policies of the major imperialist powers.

This is a warning to the working class. The pursuit of Assange has been used to establish a precedent that will be deployed against the emerging social and political struggles of the working class opposing the cost of living crisis, austerity and the war policies that threaten a catastrophic global conflagration.

The fight to defeat this precedent and to free Assange is crucial to the struggle for all the social and democratic rights of working people.



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