

Julian Assange tests positive for COVID-19

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Julian Assange has contracted COVID-19. He received the test result Saturday, on the day several thousand people formed a human chain around Parliament in London to protest his persecution.

His wife, Stella, told the press, “I am obviously worried about him and the next few days will be crucial for his general health. He is now locked in his cell for 24 hours a day.” She said Assange had been feeling ill throughout the week and developed a fever and cough on Friday.

Assange’s infection confirms the repeated warnings of medical professionals and his legal team that his health and life are endangered by his wrongful imprisonment. It must lend renewed urgency to the demand for his immediate release.

Just months before the pandemic, over 100 doctors signed an open letter to the British government warning that Assange’s life was at risk while he was kept in HMP Belmarsh—the UK’s top-security prison. When COVID-19 began to spread rapidly throughout Britain, one of the lead signatories, Dr Stephen Frost, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Given what we know about this case, Mrs Assange is right to be concerned. Julian Assange, because he is immuno-compromised, following years of arbitrary detention first in the Ecuadorian Embassy and latterly in Belmarsh prison, is necessarily at higher risk of contracting any viral or bacterial infection, including infection by coronavirus.

“He should be released on bail immediately, so that he can access the health care which he urgently requires. The UK government is effectively playing Russian roulette with Julian Assange’s life.”

Another doctor, Lissa Johnson, explained, “As long ago as 2015 medical and human rights experts warned that anything more than a trivial illness could prove fatal for Julian Assange. His health is even more fragile now, and the coronavirus only renders those warnings more urgent and more dire.”

She added, “If Julian Assange does succumb to coronavirus or any other catastrophic illness in prison, it will not be an accident. It will be a foreseeable result of prolonged psychological torture and wilful medical neglect.”

The WikiLeaks founder applied for bail in March 2020, with lawyers citing the “very real” and potentially “fatal” risk posed to his fragile health by the coronavirus pandemic. His concern was such that he was prepared to accept strict conditions, including house arrest and GPS tagging. He was refused bail on the absurd grounds, during a global lockdown, that he posed a “flight risk”.

Shortly afterwards, he was excluded from a national prisoner release programme, prompted by evidence of the alarming spread of COVID 19 among prison staff and inmates. The bogus reason given was that, since he was held on remand (without charge) and not serving a sentence, he was ineligible.

By the end of October 2020, Ministry of Justice figures showed that 1,529 inmates had been infected, 600 in the previous month alone. At least 32 prisoners had been killed by the virus.

In November, a wave of infections hit Belmarsh prison. Stella Assange revealed, “I’ve been told the number of people infected with COVID on Julian’s house block is 56, including staff.” This was on a block with fewer than 200 inmates.

Assange and the other inmates were placed under an indefinite lockdown, kept in their cells 24 hours a day. His lawyer Edward Fitzgerald had warned at his bail application of the “risk to his mental health and his human contact” posed by lockdown procedures. At Assange’s extradition hearing that autumn, his defence team presented extensive medical evidence of the damage done to his mental health and of the risk of suicide.

In the same month as Belmarsh’s COVID lockdown,

one of Assange's friends inside the prison committed suicide after being issued a deportation order to Brazil. Stella tweeted, "Spoke to Julian. A friend of his killed himself in the early hours of this morning. His body is still in the cell on Julian's wing. Julian is devastated."

Britain's relentless persecution of the heroic journalist has continued to take its toll in the year-and-a-half since. In October 2021, during a High Court appeal which later went against Assange, he suffered a mini stroke in Belmarsh. According to the *Daily Mail*, he was "left with a drooping right eyelid, memory problems and signs of neurological damage."

Describing the horrific conditions in which the stroke took place, Stella said, "It must have been horrendous hearing a High Court appeal in which you can't participate, which is discussing your mental health and your risk of suicide and in which the US is arguing you are making it all up."

Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, examined Assange with a medical team inside Belmarsh Prison in May 2019 and concluded that he showed symptoms of psychological torture. He commented on his illness, "Assange's stroke is no surprise. As we warned after examining him, unless relieved of the constant pressure of isolation, arbitrariness and persecution, his health would enter a downward spiral endangering his life. [The] UK is literally torturing him to death."

Melzer added, "As Assange clearly was not medically fit to attend his own trial through videolink, how can they even discuss whether he is fit to be exposed to a show trial in the US, a country that refuses to prosecute its torturers and war criminals but persecutes whistleblowers and journalists?"

Assange's COVID infection is the latest in the list of crimes inflicted on him by his British government captors, acting on behalf of Washington and Langley. The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote during the first year of the pandemic, "The unavoidable conclusion is that Assange's persecutors hope to see the COVID-19 disease do their dirty work for them and kill the most significant journalist of the twenty-first century."

In September 2021, a Yahoo News investigation proved that this was the continuation of plans hatched in the CIA years ago, when Assange was still claiming asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, to assassinate him. The legal case seeking his extradition

pursues the same objective by different means, intent on entombing him in a US supermax facility.

Saturday's protest was the largest yet organised in defence of Assange, attracting a broader range of ages and social backgrounds. It indicated the potential that exists for a mass, global campaign to secure the WikiLeaks founder's freedom and safety. With the threat to Assange's life so advanced and the reality of imperialist war, which his work exposed, so severe, that campaign must be urgently built in the international working class.



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