

Doctors send open letter to British and US governments demanding Assange's freedom

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Doctors for Assange, a group of more than 300 medical experts from around the world, issued an open letter on Monday to British Home Secretary Suella Braveman and US Attorney General Merrick Garland, insisting that they immediately halt the state persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and free him unconditionally.

The doctors' organisation, which has campaigned in defence of Assange since late 2019, explains that it is now composed of psychiatrists, psychologists and other respected and highly qualified healthcare professionals from more than 35 countries. They write that they are "deeply concerned" that the ongoing extradition of Assange from Britain to the US, and his related imprisonment in London, "threatens not only the health of Julian Assange, but also the health of our democracy."

The letter was sent in the aftermath of news that Assange had tested positive for COVID-19 on October 8.

The doctors note: "Given his chronic lung ailment, Mr Assange may be at increased risk of serious illness resulting from Covid infection. In addition, Mr Assange's mental health is placed at further risk by the solitary confinement that he has been forced to endure since his positive Covid test."

Assange's wife Stella, who reported the positive COVID result, explained on Twitter that the response of the Belmarsh Prison authorities in London was to isolate Assange in his cell 24 hours a day.

Several days ago, Stella reported that Assange was still testing positive for the virus and was enduring his 10th day of solitary. Yesterday she tweeted the welcome news that Assange had tested negative, meaning that his full-time isolation will be ended and he will be able to again receive visitors, including his

family.

As the WSWS noted when it first reported Assange's COVID infection, the exposure of the WikiLeaks publisher to the potentially deadly virus was the deliberate and predictable outcome of the actions of the British authorities.

They had rejected the warnings from Doctors For Assange that the WikiLeaks founder would be at heightened risk of succumbing to COVID and the accompanying calls for his release from prison in the earliest stages of the pandemic.

As repeated COVID waves swept through Belmarsh and the British prison system as a whole, claiming dozens of lives, Assange was excluded from a prison-release program for vulnerable, non-violent "offenders." He has been kept in Belmarsh without charge, solely to facilitate the US extradition attempt. The District Court rejected a bail application, even as it initially blocked extradition on narrow health grounds early last year.

While Assange has tested negative, there is a growing body of evidence linking COVID infection to long-term health risks, including the heightened danger of heart attacks and strokes. A study published in the journal of the American Medical Association last year found that people who had experienced a bout of the coronavirus were twice as likely as a comparable cohort to suffer from a stroke.

Assange, prior to his infection, had already suffered a minor stroke during extradition proceedings last November. In addition, COVID infection can damage the lungs, under conditions where Assange already has a protracted lung ailment. Long COVID, which studies indicate can affect anywhere from 5 to 40 percent of those who have been infected, covers a debilitating series of conditions that can involve almost every organ

in the body.

Whatever the outcome of his COVID infection, as the doctors note, Assange's health and his very life remains in imminent danger as long as he is imprisoned and the US pursues extradition.

Significantly, the doctors present not only a medical indictment, but also a strong political condemnation of the treatment of Assange, with the two elements of his plight inextricably connected.

They write that the "threats to Mr Assange's health are the cumulative result of extraordinarily cruel, unusual, degrading and inhuman conditions imposed on him."

These include "more than ten years of arbitrary detention," including his current confinement in Belmarsh, sometimes described as Britain's Guantanamo Bay; "character assassination campaigns in the media"; "a relentless persecution that systematically violated the rule of law and due process"; "illegal surveillance in the Ecuadorian embassy," and "being targeted in plans of the CIA to kidnap and assassinate him."

The letter includes a sharp precis of the lawless US campaign against Assange which has involved the "firepower of at least three government agencies...including the Department of Justice overseeing the attempted prosecution, the CIA drawing up plans for kidnap and assassination, and the FBI overseeing and greenlighting computer crimes in Iceland committed by a hacker in a scheme to falsely implicate Mr Assange, as corroborated by the government of Iceland."

The latter is a reference to Sigurdur Thordarson, a convicted Icelandic hacker and child molester, who also served as a key witness for the indictment that forms the basis of the US extradition request. Last year, Thordarson admitted that the information he provided largely consisted of lies, proffered in exchange for immunity from US prosecution.

The doctors note that Assange's suffering has been exacerbated by the knowledge that he would never receive a fair trial in the US.

The letter cites the assessment of former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer that this treatment constitutes "psychological torture." Melzer's finding, first made in 2020, was based on rigorous medical examinations of Assange.

The doctors state that as medical experts, they have a responsibility to speak out against and oppose state torture. They conclude by calling for the recipients of the letter, the British Home Secretary and the US Attorney-General, to "urgently intervene to end the extradition process and ensure Julian Assange is promptly released."

The letter is the latest in a series that Doctors for Assange has issued to the governments and authorities responsible for the persecution of Assange in the US, Britain and Australia, where the WikiLeaks founder was born and holds citizenship.

All previous letters, despite the credentials of their authors and the weight of their indictment, have been either blithely dismissed or simply ignored, as were Melzer's findings of psychological torture. That response itself underscores the barely-concealed lawlessness of the US-led campaign to destroy Assange for his exposure of the war crimes of the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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