

London press briefing warns of dangers of Assange extradition

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15 February 2024

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange “could be on a plane to the United States within days.” This was the stark warning by his wife Stella at the start of a briefing organised by the Foreign Press Association in London Thursday. She was joined by WikiLeaks Editor Kristinn Hrafnsson and Reporters Without Borders Director Rebecca Vincent.

Assange, an Australian citizen, faces charges under the US Espionage Act with a potential 170-year sentence for exposing American war crimes and other human rights abuses—most infamously during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a hearing next Tuesday-Wednesday in the UK High Court, he will seek leave to appeal an order for his extradition.

Stella explained, “It is the final hearing, if it doesn’t go Julian’s way; there is no possibility to appeal to the Supreme Court or anywhere else in this jurisdiction.” A decision in Assange’s favour would lead to a full appeal hearing some time in the future.

Summarizing what is at stake, Hrafnsson said Assange’s extradition would have “dark and serious implications for press freedoms all around the world.” If Assange can be prosecuted by the United States then “no journalist anywhere... is safe. We are seeing, creeping upon us, an attack on press freedom worldwide. It is like a disease... Julian Assange has been the canary in the coalmine.”

Hrafnsson pointed to the National Security Act passed in the UK last December, which is “very much inspired by the US Espionage Act.”

If the judges rule against Assange, Stella told reporters, he will “apply to the European Court of Human Rights for a Rule 39 order to stop an extradition, as well as the full application bringing up all the points we’ve raised over the years that Julian’s human rights have been comprehensively violated,

systematically violated for years and years.”

But, she warned, “Rule 39 has been the subject of a lot of news stories recently; we all know the government’s position in relation to deportations. And this is of course a huge concern.”

The government has been considering options to sidestep or totally ignore its obligations under the European Convention of Human Rights in connection with its policy of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Stella added that the High Court Judges “can announce their decision the same day [as the hearing closes, on Wednesday] and then say that their written argument would come out in due course—that’s happened before. We are of course extremely worried that the decision could be taken immediately and that the Home Office would move to extradite him very quickly.”

Hrafnsson commented, “There are people who have been brought straight from the courthouse... straight to the airport to be flown out on an extradition plane.”

More details were given about the abusive conditions in which Assange is meanwhile being held in the UK on behalf of the US government.

Stella explained that Julian has still not been granted permission to appear in court in person, as he has requested so that he can “ask for clarification and consult with his lawyers in court.” His request was denied at his previous public hearing, where he was “given access via videolink, like a spectator.” The last time Assange was able to leave Belmarsh prison even to go to court “was the 6th of January 2021.”

Inside Belmarsh, he is kept in a 3x2 metre cell “for over 22 hours a day.” He was sick for a week over Christmas, and it was “only after the intervention of the [Australian] High Commissioner that he was actually able to see a doctor. His health is in decline, mentally

and physically. His life is at risk every single day he stays in prison.”

Vincent added that, during a visit with Assange after his illness, “I was very concerned by the state of his health. At that stage he had coughed so much he had broken a rib and was in a lot of pain. His situation is pretty grim now.”

Describing his continued detention and extradition as a “matter of life or death,” she referred to the statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Dr. Alice Edwards, who released a statement last week warning of “dire consequences for Mr Assange’s health and wellbeing.”

Edwards predicted a “high likelihood that any form of isolation and solitary confinement, especially prolonged solitary confinement, will have an irreparable impact of Mr Assange’s psychological and even, potentially physical health.”

Conditions in the US would be even worse, with Stella denouncing the hypocrisy of the “so-called US assurances” that Assange will be well treated, which served as the pretext for the High Court to overturn the initial ruling against extradition on grounds of the high risk of suicide.

Referring to “misreporting”, which was not just “misleading” but “malicious”, of these facts, she said, “These are not assurances. For one, they are conditional. They do not stop the US from doing anything. In fact, they license the US to put him the very conditions that [lower court judge Vanessa] Baraitser found would drive him to kill himself...”

“Who determines what conditions Julian will be in if he’s extradited to the United States? The intelligence agencies. The very same intelligence agencies that plotted to murder him.”

“Julian will be put in a hole if he is extradited. There is no doubt about that. He will be put in a hole so far and deep in the ground that I don’t think I’ll ever see him again. And after 13 years of enduring abuse and torture, do you really think a person can survive that?”

Stella also referenced the recent treatment of Joshua Schulte, alleged to have been the source behind the “Vault 7” leaks of CIA cyberespionage tools published by WikiLeaks in 2017. Schulte “was just sentenced to 40 years. I mean think about what that means. It’s a mafia move.”

Ahead of and during his trial, he was “held under

special administrative measures, which is a euphemism for torture.”

According to Hrafnsson, WikiLeaks itself would also be “hampered in actually operating in the United States. Lawyers have advised WikiLeaks staff not to travel to the United States.”

The reason, he explained, was the declaration by former CIA Director Mike Pompeo that WikiLeaks is considered a “non-state hostile intelligence service.” This was a “highly thought out legal definition which we now know was defined to justify the plan to kidnap or assassinate Julian Assange.”

In his concluding remarks, Hrafnsson stressed the fight to bring the case to an end “immediately”, pointing to the “punishment by process” Assange was being made to endure in “an obviously deliberate attempt to wear him down” through years of legal proceedings and abuse.

“The original request for an appeal went in to the courts in September 2022. It took 10 months for the judge, Justice Swift is his name, to come up with two-and-a-half pages of no argument: simply, ‘I read all through this, I don’t see any grounds for appeal.’ And now we are here, eight months later...”

“This gives you a sense of the time frame. Five years. While he lingers and slowly dies in prison.”

Assange’s hearing begins Tuesday morning next week. The Socialist Equality Party and the World Socialist Web Site encourages its readers and supporters to join us at the protest outside the Royal Courts of Justice in Central London.



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