

Obama administration steps up vendetta against WikiLeaks' Julian Assange

By Patrick O'Connor
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The British *Independent* newspaper reported Wednesday that US and Swedish officials were engaged in behind closed doors discussions aimed at delivering WikiLeaks' founder Julian Assange into American custody. Assange is currently imprisoned in London, awaiting an extradition hearing next Tuesday on bogus and politically motivated sexual allegations raised in Sweden.

Citing unnamed diplomatic sources, the *Independent* revealed that "informal discussions" were underway between the American and Swedish authorities. "Sources stressed that no extradition request would be submitted until and unless the US government laid charges against Mr Assange, and that attempts to take him to America would only take place after legal proceedings are concluded in Sweden," the newspaper stated.

Jennifer Robinson, a lawyer acting for Assange, told ABC radio in Australia that any extradition to Sweden would be a precursor to extradition to the US. She said there were "rumours already that an indictment has been put before a grand jury in the US."

The Swedish allegations are nothing but a vehicle for the vicious vendetta against Assange being pursued by the administration of President Barack Obama. The US campaign is being waged in retaliation for the journalist's principled role in coordinating the dissemination of a vast cache of diplomatic cables exposing the criminal activities carried out by US imperialism on a daily basis around the world.

US Attorney-General Eric Holder this week emphasised that his office was investigating every possible avenue for prosecuting the WikiLeaks' editor. "I don't want to get into specifics here, but people would have a misimpression if the only statute you think that we are looking at is the Espionage Act," he declared. "That is certainly something that might play a role, but there are other statutes, other tools that we have at our disposal."

A *New York Times* article on Tuesday, "US Prosecutors Study WikiLeaks Prosecution", pointed to some of the Obama administration's desperate efforts to concoct a legal pretext for its pursuit of Assange. An unnamed government official said prosecutors were investigating whether WikiLeaks had actively assisted in the leak of the diplomatic documents rather than merely publishing them. This would potentially allow Assange

to be prosecuted on the same charges as the leaker—alleged to be former army intelligence analyst Bradley Manning. The *New York Times* acknowledged that there was no evidence that WikiLeaks had done anything but publish the documents. The newspaper cited another administration official who revealed that the Justice Department was also investigating whether Assange could be charged with "trafficking in stolen government property"—an absurd accusation given that the published cables are reproductions of files, not physical documents.

Assange confronts the very real danger of being assassinated or "disappeared" if he were handed over to the American authorities. Senior political figures, Democrats and Republicans, have identified the WikiLeaks' editor as an "enemy combatant" and terrorist and demanded his assassination. The Obama administration has said and done nothing to distance itself from such outrageous provocations.

The immediate aim of Washington and its allies appears to be to use the trumped up Swedish allegations to mire Assange in legal proceedings for as long as possible, diverting him from overseeing the cable release and the defence of WikiLeaks against on-line attacks that are reportedly being coordinated from within the White House

Numerous experts in international law have condemned the legal proceedings against Assange. While the journalist has not even been charged with any offence in Sweden, he has been denied bail and locked up in a segregated unit of London's Wandsworth prison, with only one hour of exercise permitted each day and "limited access" to the internet. Moreover, he has been detained before Swedish prosecutors have had to present any prima facie evidence that there is a case to answer. His legal team is reportedly already preparing to challenge the attempted extradition in the London High Court. The *Independent* has reported: "If they lose the case there, they can take it all the way to the Supreme Court, a process which could last many months."

In a letter to the British *Guardian* published Wednesday, Katrin Axelsson from Women Against Rape—an organisation that campaigns for more sex offenders to be punished—questioned the "unusual zeal" with which the WikiLeaks' founder was being pursued. "Assange, who it

seems has no criminal convictions, was refused bail in England despite sureties of more than £120,000,” she wrote. “Yet bail following rape allegations is routine... There is a long tradition of the use of rape and sexual assault for political agendas that have nothing to do with women’s safety.”

The Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday rushed to the defence of the Obama administration and its witch-hunt of Assange. Attorney-General Robert McClelland claimed that obtaining classified information was an offence under Australian law.

McClelland told journalists: “The distribution of that information, again without knowing the United States’ law, may be an offence. Certainly to release that sort of information by an officer of the Commonwealth, if it were Australian material, may certainly involve issues of criminality, but again I can’t speak in respect to American laws... In respect to the further distribution of [the leaked material], clearly it is something that the United State’s Attorney-General, Eric Holder, who’s a highly competent lawyer, has said they are looking at and looking at very closely. And I have said we would provide every assistance to those investigations to the United States government.”

The government’s justice minister Brendan O’Connor today confirmed that the Australian Federal Police had launched its own investigation. “We want to, of course, always ensure that this country and its citizens are secure. And if there are any concerns about our national security then they must be properly considered and examined and that’s being done now.”

The AFP investigation potentially opens up yet another judicial avenue for harassing Assange. The Australian government has definite form with such methods—former Solomon Islands Attorney-General Julian Moti has spent the last four years challenging a still unresolved case that, like Assange’s, involved sexual misconduct allegations, and is alleged by Moti to be a politically motivated frame-up.

The Australian government is not backing away from Prime Minister Gillard’s provocative and highly improper December 2 statement that WikiLeaks’ publication of the US cables was “illegal”. This is despite Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd earlier blaming “the Americans” for the leak, and flies in the face of mounting condemnation of Gillard’s stance in Australia. (See: “Support builds for Julian Assange in Australia”)

The prime minister has undoubtedly been issued definite orders from Washington to hold the line. Throughout the “cablegate” affair she has functioned as nothing but the mouthpiece for the American political establishment, making clear her contempt for the democratic and legal rights of Assange, an Australian citizen.

Opposition to the witch-hunt and persecution of Assange is building around the world. The official WikiLeaks page on the Facebook website has expanded from 151,000 supporters on November 28, to 930,000 on December 7, to more than 1.1 million today. More than 1,000 “mirror” servers hosting

WikiLeaks’ archive have been set up in every part of the world. Well over 100,000 people have downloaded the encoded WikiLeaks “insurance file” of highly confidential documents that may be decrypted in the event that the attacks against WikiLeaks and Julian Assange escalate.

A reported 1,500 computer hackers, or “hacktivists”, have launched retaliatory actions against the websites of corporations and governments involved in attacking WikiLeaks. Corporations that have frozen donation services for WikiLeaks such as PayPal, MasterCard, and Visa, and others such as Amazon, which refused to continue hosting the organisation’s servers, have come under sustained attack. Politicians including Sarah Palin have also been targeted, as has the chief Swedish prosecutor. According to the Dutch media, a 16-year-old boy in Rotterdam, Holland was arrested Wednesday night for allegedly taking part in the operation against MasterCard.

In a statement conveyed by his lawyer, Jennifer Robinson, and reported in today’s Australian, Assange said he was concerned that he was unable to respond to new allegations that he was behind these hacking activities. “He did not make any such instruction,” she said, “and indeed he sees this as a deliberate attempt to conflate hacking organisations and those engaged in hacking and WikiLeaks, which is not a hacking organisation. It is a news organisation and a publisher.”

Protests and demonstrations have been organised in several countries today and over the weekend. Such actions in defence of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, and Bradley Manning are now a burning issue confronting working people and youth internationally.

The mass cable leak has laid bare the true state of social and political relations in the twenty-first century. WikiLeaks is regarded as such an immense threat by Washington because the criminal objectives and operations of US imperialism and its allies, which stand in direct opposition to the interests and sentiments of the broad mass of the world’s population, depend on total secrecy.

While the persecution of Assange has sparked a passionate movement in his defence, it as yet lacks a clear political focus. The struggle to defend democratic rights and internet freedom is inseparable from the struggle for the development of an internationally unified movement of the working class, directed against imperialism and the profit system, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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