

Julian Assange was denied access to lawyers, visitors in Britain's Belmarsh prison

By Oscar Grenfell
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WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has spent most of the past two weeks in isolation at Belmarsh prison said Christine Assange, his mother, on Monday.

Assange had “still not been able to receive any visits. Not even from his lawyers!” Mrs. Assange said on Twitter on April 22. She added that his treatment had been “outrageous, & appears punitive to continue to keep him isolated.”

Mrs. Assange noted that Belmarsh has been dubbed “the UK’s Guantanamo,” after the US military prison notorious for indefinite detention, torture, protracted isolation and other violations of human rights. It is where most British individuals charged with terrorism offences have been imprisoned.

Some 36 hours after she issued her tweet, Mrs. Assange stated on April 24: “Julian has had one video conference with his lawyers & they will visit him at Belmarsh Prison on April 26. Many thanks to all those calling for this visit from his lawyers.” WikiLeaks subsequently confirmed that Assange will have an “in person visit” with his legal team “in the coming days.”

Assange was arrested by UK police officers on April 11, who dragged the journalist out of the Ecuadorian embassy, as he shouted, “the UK must resist.” The WikiLeaks founder, a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, is being pursued by the Trump administration for exposing US war crimes.

The apparent denial of the WikiLeaks founder’s right to hold in person consultations with his legal counsel, in the days after his arrest and conviction on the bail charges, casts grave doubt that he will be afforded due process. It is a further indication that the Trump administration’s request for Assange’s extradition to the US and the resulting legal proceedings in Britain are a pseudo-judicial cover for an extraordinary rendition operation, aimed at placing the WikiLeaks publisher in the clutches of the war criminals and CIA torturers he has done so much to expose.

The reported isolation of Assange has been enforced in the lead up to his next court appearance, over the extradition

request, on May 2.

The attitude of the British authorities to the WikiLeaks founder was demonstrated when he was summarily convicted on bail charges in the immediate aftermath of his arrest.

None of the crucial legal questions was considered at the hearing. According to some experts, the charge was effectively resolved years ago as a result of the fact that Assange forfeited bail money in 2012, and spent more time involuntarily detained in the Ecuadorian embassy than the maximum sentence for bail violations.

Instead, the presiding UK district judge, Michael Snow denounced Assange as a “narcissist” and sent him to prison. In a little reported exchange, Snow told Assange that the WikiLeaks founder could expedite the extradition proceedings if he wished, adding: “The advantage is that you get over to the United States, resolve this matter and get on with your life.”

According to some reports, Snow may preside over Assange’s next court appearance and subsequent extradition hearings.

The openly hostile treatment of Assange by British authorities underscores the real danger that they will move to extradite him as quickly as possible.

The US Justice Department has sought to facilitate this, by limiting the publicly-disclosed charges against Assange to two counts of attempting to gain unauthorised access to a US government computer.

The threadbare charges claim that US army whistleblower Chelsea Manning asked Assange for assistance in cracking a “hash” or password in 2010. There is no evidence that this ever took place. Even if it did, the only aim would have been to protect Manning’s anonymity, a common practice among journalists working with whistleblowers.

The limited character of the charges is aimed at evading bans under existing treaties between the UK and the US on extradition for “political offenses.” If he is dispatched to the US, however, Assange faces the prospect of further charges, including espionage, which carry a maximum sentence of

life imprisonment or the death penalty.

US attempts to concoct additional charges against Assange were demonstrated yesterday, when a federal appeals court rejected a request by Manning to be released on bail.

The courageous whistleblower has been held in solitary confinement for over six weeks because she has refused to give perjured testimony against Assange before a Grand Jury. Her continued detention is a transparent attempt to force her to cooperate in the US-led vendetta against Assange.

Joshua Schulte, a former CIA contractor, has similarly been held in solitary confinement for over a year. He is accused of leaking a massive trove of documents to WikiLeaks, exposing the CIA's computer hacking and spying operations, and is undoubtedly being subjected to the same coercive pressure as Manning.

Following yesterday's hearing, Manning defiantly condemned the US government for continuing "to abuse the grand jury process." "I don't have anything to contribute to this, or any other grand jury," she declared.

Manning's punitive detention is a warning of the treatment that will be meted out to Assange if he is extradited to the US.

The dangers were also spelt out in Reporters Without Borders' 2019 World Press Freedom Index, released yesterday. It warned against "The violent anti-press rhetoric from the highest level of the US government," physical assaults against US journalists and the threat of prosecution under the Espionage Act hanging over all whistleblowers.

The assault on freedom of the press is not limited to the Trump administration.

Senior Democratic Party representatives have issued the most vociferous condemnations of Assange, branding him as a foreign agent without First Amendment rights, because of WikiLeaks' publication of true and newsworthy material exposing the Democratic National Committee's attempts to rig the party's 2016 presidential primaries against Bernie Sanders, and Hillary Clinton's pledges to the Wall Street banks that she would do their bidding.

The corporate press in the US, Britain and Australia, has played a shameful role. Demonstrating they function as the servile stenographers of the intelligence agencies, a host of reporters have declared that Assange is not a "journalist." Their arguments are largely based on the fact that he is not employed by a multi-billion dollar media conglomerate and publishes material that exposes the lies and abuses of governments.

Since his arrest, numerous corporate publications have repeated the personal smears against Assange concocted by the corrupt Ecuadorian regime to justify its termination of his political asylum.

Some have featured videos of Assange during his nearly seven-year detention in the embassy. The footage, taken as part of an Ecuadorian spying operation targeting the WikiLeaks founder, may constitute a violation of the right to privacy of a political asylee under international law.

These lies and slanders against Assange are in contrast to the immense support that he enjoys among millions of workers, students and young people.

The mass opposition to Assange's persecution must be transformed into a political movement, to prevent his extradition and secure his freedom.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Parties (SEP) around the world are committed to playing a central role in this crucial fight.

Over the past 18 months, the SEP (Australia) has held a series of rallies, demanding that the Australian government immediately fulfil its obligations to Assange, as an Australian citizen, by securing his return to Australia, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

Another rally, aimed at placing this demand at the centre of the current Australian federal election, will be held in Sydney this Saturday, followed by meetings in a number of cities.

The SEP in the UK has taken part in protests and vigils calling for an all-out mobilisation against the moves to extradite Assange. It will participate in a London public meeting, called by the Julian Assange Defence Committee, on April 26.

The SEP (US) has been at the forefront of the struggle for Manning's immediate release, winning support from auto workers, teachers and other key sections of the working class, along with students and youth.

The WSWS calls on all defenders of democratic rights to join the fight for Assange's freedom. Contact us today.

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