

Doctors' open letter defending Julian Assange wins global support

By Laura Tiernan
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An open letter by medical doctors urging action to save the life of imprisoned WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange has received international media coverage, winning growing support among doctors.

More than 65 medical doctors called on UK Home Secretary Priti Patel to transfer Assange from Belmarsh maximum security prison to a university teaching hospital for urgent medical assessment and treatment. The letter was published Monday.

In the midst of Britain's general election, the doctors' intervention was widely reported in the UK, including by the *Independent*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening Standard*, *Sky News*, ITV and *Metro*. It was the most-read story Monday morning in the *Guardian's* UK online edition. In Australia, ABC radio, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian*, the *Herald Sun* and dozens of local and regional newspapers carried items.

The doctors' warnings were also reported in New Zealand, India, Sri Lanka, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, France, China and across the Middle East. In the US, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, CNBC and *Newsweek* carried news items.

Many news outlets cited passages from the doctors' open letter, while reports in the *New York Times*, *Guardian* and *Sydney Morning Herald* were predictably the worst, evading the urgent warnings issued by doctors and cynically minimising the threats to Assange's life—mentioning only “depression,” “dental issues and a serious shoulder ailment” dating back to 2015. They made no reference to UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer's warnings, cited in the letter, that Assange might die in prison.

The open letter has also faced deliberate censorship from state broadcaster the BBC. On Monday afternoon, Socialist Equality Party (UK) National Secretary Chris

Marsden, the party's candidate for Sheffield Central in the general election, issued a letter of protest over the BBC's failure to report the open letter. Under the subject line, “No coverage of doctors' letter on Julian Assange,” Marsden noted the BBC's “clear political bias and censorship” and demanded that the BBC “does its job as the national broadcaster.”

Dr Marco Chiesa, Consultant Psychiatrist and Visiting Professor at University College London, appeared yesterday on RT UK. He outlined signatories' grave concerns for Assange's wellbeing.

“We have credible reports from people who saw or met Julian in recent weeks, such as his father, his barrister Jennifer Robinson and the former UK Ambassador Craig Murray, and they all agreed that Julian's physical and mental condition were steadily and seriously deteriorating.

“So as medical doctors, we have become extremely concerned that nothing has been done about a man—who many now consider a political prisoner—dying in a British prison.”

Since Monday, more medical doctors from Greece, Austria, Italy, the US, Australia and the UK have added their name to the open letter. Doctors4Assange told the *World Socialist Web Site* they have been inundated with messages of support.

Doctors4Assange lead signatory Dr Stephen Frost said, “If proof were needed that this initiative were necessary, it is needed no longer. It appears that the people of the world do not need much encouragement to understand what is going on.

“Those responsible for this farrago will be called to account. It is well understood by doctors that in this situation they have a special responsibility, to themselves and to the public.”

Doctors4Assange sent their open letter to Home

Secretary Priti Patel and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott on Friday, but have received no reply. Follow-up emails to Patel and Abbott on Monday have also been ignored.

On Monday, *Business Insider* and *Newsweek* reported a brief statement from Patel, apparently in response to the open letter: “The allegations Mr Assange was subjected to torture are unfounded and wholly false. The UK is committed to upholding the rule of law, and ensuring that no one is ever above it.”

Patel’s statement, with its obscene implication that Assange is the transgressor, ignored the urgent warnings by medical doctors over his deteriorating condition and also their request that he be moved from Belmarsh to a proper hospital setting due to fears he may die.

In Australia on Monday, a report on the doctors’ open letter was presented to a meeting of cross-party parliamentarians led by Independent MP Andrew Wilkie and Liberal National Party MP George Christensen. According to a report of the meeting published by Wilkie, the meeting discussed “Assange’s deteriorating health, the injustice of his potential extradition to the US, and the way in which his treatment is a direct attack on the public’s right to know.” The MPs are requesting a meeting with the US Ambassador to Australia and the British High Commissioner to Australia “to discuss how Mr Assange can be brought back to Australia as quickly as possible.”

Under conditions in which even right-wing and conservative politicians in Australia are sounding the alarm over Assange’s health and urging that US extradition proceedings be quashed, the silence of Diane Abbott and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is deafening. As a decade-long multi-state persecution of the world’s most famous political prisoner reaches its climax on UK soil, Corbyn and Abbott’s silence is being noted angrily by millions.

Assange, a journalist and publisher, faces Espionage Act charges and 175 years in prison—effectively a death sentence—for exposing US war crimes and massive state corruption. With his health declining rapidly due to years of psychological torture in the centre of London, the silence of Corbyn and Abbott even in the midst of the British general election campaign makes them complicit in an immense political crime.

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