

European legal team will seek asylum for Julian Assange in France

By Alex Lantier
22 February 2020

Members of imprisoned WikiLeaks journalist Julian Assange's legal team held a press conference, together with Assange's father John Shipton, on Thursday in Paris. They announced that they will seek asylum in France for Assange, the publisher of WikiLeaks who has been relentlessly hounded by Washington and the European powers for nearly a decade and is currently held in Belmarsh prison near London.

They will also challenge his threatened extradition to the United States by launching a suit before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. This strategy is viable despite Brexit, as the ECHR is attached not to the European Union but to the Council of Europe, of which Britain remains a member.

The week before the opening of Assange's extradition trial, the meeting came amid a groundswell of support internationally among workers and youth for the detained journalist. Calls to support Assange have been viewed by millions on social media, while multiple protests including by French "yellow vests" have demanded Assange's release. The Paris press conference pointed to growing awareness of the threat posed to fundamental democratic rights posed by the relentless police-state persecution of Assange.

Speakers at the conference included defense attorney Éric Dupond-Moretti; Spanish investigative magistrate Baltasar Garzón, who is leading Assange's European legal team; Dupond-Moretti's associate Antoine Vey; John Shipton; and representatives of the Reporters without Borders (RSF) association that hosted the event.

Dupond-Moretti began the press conference with an appeal against the "horrific" conditions under which Assange is imprisoned. "Assange has ever more difficulty talking. Sometimes he is prostrate," Dupond-Moretti said, recalling "the UN special report

on torture by Nils Melzer, from Switzerland, who wrote in May 2019 that beyond physical problems, Assange shows every symptom of prolonged exposure to psychological torture."

Dupond-Moretti pointed to the existential threat to press freedom posed by a state decision to target a journalist in retaliation for exposing war crimes, like those revealed by the "Collateral Murder" video Assange published of US soldiers killing civilians and journalists in Iraq. He declared, "The 175-year prison term which Assange faces in the United States is a repugnant punishment, which is intolerable and contrary to any conception of the Rights of Man."

This illegitimate and shocking persecution of a individual for publishing vital information opens the way for Assange to receive asylum in France, Dupond-Moretti said: "We are of course working on the possibility of requesting political asylum from the French authorities. Our constitution permits it. ... Article 53 of our Constitution allows France to serve as a refuge to any person who is threatened for defending freedom of expression."

Dupond-Moretti also pointed to Assange's extensive personal ties to France—where WikiLeaks was first incorporated, where many of its servers reside, and where his partner and youngest child live.

"We will ask to meet the president of France in the coming days, in fact in the coming hours" over this asylum request, Dupond-Moretti stated.

Dupont-Moretti and Vey also explained that they are working to formulate a new legal basis for bringing Assange's case before the EHCR, which has previously ruled that it could not examine Assange's case as it lacked jurisdiction due to a technicality.

These remarks sounded as a condemnation not only of the persecution of Assange by Washington and

London, but also of former French President François Hollande's rejection of Assange's earlier request for asylum in France, in an open letter published by *Le Monde* in 2015. An earlier request for asylum formulated by the lawyer Juan Branco to France's current president, Emmanuel Macron, has already been rejected.

These facts underscore that the defense of Julian Assange requires not only legal measures, but above all the construction of a powerful mass movement to demand his liberation from prison and the dropping of all the trumped-up charges against him. The behavior of the US government and all the major European governments have demonstrated their vicious hostility to Assange and their contempt for fundamental democratic rights.

Baltasar Garzón—well known for his role in trying to prosecute Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in Spain, and in investigating the crimes of the Spanish fascist regime covered by the illegitimate 1977 Amnesty Law—pointed to the rampant criminality of the US-led prosecution of Assange.

He said, “The very same people pursuing him as a delinquent are those who have committed crimes in order to pursue him. ... A very grave injustice is being committed, which can affect the entire community of independent media, as well as freedom of expression. It is an attempt to silence all those who are critical of the state.”

He explained, “Julian Assange has been the target of espionage while he was a protected person in the Ecuadorian embassy, as he had received asylum from that country. Moreover, the security firm responsible for ensuring Assange's safety, as he was a political refugee in that embassy ... did not protect Julian Assange but collaborated with the United States to furnish sensitive information about Julian Assange, the people visiting him, and on his lawyers. So his rights were not respected, and it made his defense juridically impossible.”

Spanish courts are already investigating Spanish security firm Undercover Global, that gave the CIA audio and video of Assange and his meetings with his lawyers and supporters at the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Garzón said this investigation could provide proof to UK courts “that the trial of Assange is a political trial by the United States, aiming to prevent

the exposure by Mr Assange of criminal behavior by US state agencies.”

Garzón added, “Currently we are doing detailed work to study materials ... showing a systematic violation of Julian Assange's rights, given that all Assange's documents for his trial were taken from him by Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno. Moreno gave this documentation to the United States at their request. This documentation should not be held by the US government but by Mr Assange.”

Garzón concluded with a devastating remark: “I can say that, over my entire professional life as a jurist, I have never seen such a systematic violation of all the rights of the victim as in this case.”

Assange's father, John Shipton, spoke at the press conference to explain the international significance of the attacks on basic democratic rights that underlie Assange's persecution.

Initially, Shipton said, he was concerned that “the oppression of Julian, of publishers and publications would ensure that the people of Europe would not be able to discuss among themselves movements that the United States or Washington may make to the disadvantage of Europe. But we turn the corner now, and we see it is clearly a global problem. Your being here is a recognition of a growing tidal flow that I can see will assist us to bring Julian home so he can mix freely with his family and friends.”

Shipton appealed for the freeing of his son, saying: “Julian now being 10 years in arbitrary detention, it's incomprehensible. I can't for the life of me understand why he's still in prison. He has committed no crime.”

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