

Julian Assange's mother, doctors warn he is at heightened risk due to coronavirus

By Oscar Grenfell
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Christine Assange, the mother of WikiLeaks' publisher, Julian Assange, has warned that her son's life is at heightened risk due to the danger he could contract the coronavirus infection in Britain's Belmarsh Prison. After almost a decade of arbitrary-detention and the refusal of the authorities to provide him with adequate medical care, his immune system is severely compromised.

In a tweet on Monday night, Christine Assange wrote: "New concerns for my son's life... Julian [is] chronically ill/at higher risk of dying from" coronavirus, also known as COVID-19. She cited a news report stating that "coronavirus spreads quickly in prison" and that "healthcare in prisons is substandard."

Her tweet noted that Julian Assange is being detained without charge and is non-violent. The brutal conditions of his imprisonment are one prong in the British campaign to extradite the WikiLeaks publisher to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and life imprisonment for exposing American war crimes. Christine Assange concluded by demanding that her son be immediately bailed.

Her warnings have been echoed by leading medical experts, who are signatories to a series of letters by Doctors4Assange.

Since November, the group, composed of more than 100 eminent doctors, has demanded that the British government release Assange from Belmarsh Prison and transfer him to a university teaching hospital so that he can receive adequate medical care. Their calls, which have included warnings that Assange could die if immediate action is not taken, have been ignored by the British government and Labour opposition, as well as the government and Labor opposition in Assange's home country, Australia.

In comments to the WSWWS yesterday, Dr Stephen Frost, a specialist in diagnostic radiology and leading member of Doctors4Assange, stated: "Given what we

know about this case, Mrs Assange is right to be concerned. Julian Assange, because he is immuno-compromised, following years of arbitrary detention first in the Ecuadorian Embassy and latterly in Belmarsh prison, is necessarily at higher risk of contracting any viral or bacterial infection, including infection by coronavirus.

"He should be released on bail immediately, so that he can access the health care which he urgently requires. The UK government is effectively playing Russian roulette with Julian Assange's life."

Frost referenced the finding of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer that Assange has suffered psychological torture as a result of his persecution, noting that it was ignored by the British authorities. He concluded: "If Julian Assange should die in prison, the UK government will be culpable."

Lissa Johnson, a clinical psychologist and spokesperson for Doctors4Assange, declared: "Julian Assange is absolutely at increased risk from the coronavirus in Belmarsh prison. As a torture victim suffering ongoing psychological torture, his physical health was already in a precarious state before the coronavirus outbreak. The incessant and extreme activation of stress physiology under conditions of psychological torture can seriously compromise immunity, such that simple viral and bacterial infections can rapidly become life threatening. More complex and novel viruses such as COVID-19 pose an even greater threat.

"As long ago as 2015 medical and human rights experts warned that anything more than a trivial illness could prove fatal for Julian Assange. His health is even more fragile now, and the Corona virus only renders those warnings more urgent and more dire."

Johnson stated: "If Julian Assange does succumb to coronavirus or any other catastrophic illness in prison, it will not be an accident. It will be a foreseeable result of

prolonged psychological torture and wilful medical neglect.”

Johnson for Assange to be released from prison immediately and for the extradition proceedings against him to be dropped.

Dr Bill Hogan, who works in internal medicine in the US concurred, stating: “It is also true that individuals under extreme stress are more susceptible to acquiring infections. Given the evidence of Julian’s torture, the lack of relief from the circumstances to which his torture has been ascribed, and the multiple eyewitness accounts that document Julian’s dramatic physical deterioration, I can state with high confidence that Julian is indeed more susceptible to infections generally—and coronavirus specifically—than the general population.”

The warnings come amid a rapid spike in the number of coronavirus infections globally. The shambolic official response to the virus in the US, Britain and internationally, has underscored the consequences of a decades-long assault on public healthcare. Prisoners are particularly vulnerable, due to the limited medical care they receive and their enforced confinement among other inmates.

This morning, the *Independent* reported that the Howard League for Penal Reform has written to the British Ministry of Justice, demanding to know what measures have been taken to protect prisoners from a potential outbreak.

The letter noted the “unhygienic” conditions prevailing in many prisons and warned that the disease could “flourish” if there is an outbreak under conditions of overcrowding, poor ventilation and a high proportion of inmates with compromised health. It expressed “surprise” that there “appears to have been no statement from the Ministry of Justice as to the precautions being taken.”

The *Independent* continued: “A recent report by the Nuffield Trust think tank showed prisoners in Britain frequently had hospital appointments cancelled and received less healthcare than the general public, with as many as four in 10 hospital appointments made for a prisoner cancelled or missed in 2017-18—largely due to a lack of prison staff available to transport and guard prisoners while at hospital.”

It noted that “concerns are growing that a dwindling prison workforce would be unable to provide basic necessities, such as food and security, for the UK’s 84,000 prisoners.”

Overnight, Dita Saliuka, whose brother died in Belmarsh Prison in January, tweeted: “What are the plans

for UK prisons ? for Healthcare 2019? in poor and there are prisoners with underlying health conditions that deserve the same healthcare as the rest of us or they will die!”

Saliuka and her family have rejected official claims that her brother Liridon Saliuka died as a result of self-inflicted injuries. They have claimed that there were repeated delays to his autopsy and that he had recently been moved to a standard prison cell, despite having been assessed as “permanently disabled” by a doctor.

Saliuka’s death was one of a series at Belmarsh, dubbed the UK’s “Guantanamo Bay” because of its brutal conditions. Last month a 36-year-old inmate was found dead after sustaining massive head injuries during a bashing.

Assange’s confinement in the prison is of a piece with the broader assault on his legal and democratic rights by the British authorities. During the first week of US extradition hearings which began on February 25, the WikiLeaks editor was repeatedly stripped naked and handcuffed, before having his legal documents stolen by prison guards. He was placed in a bullet-proof glass box at the back of the courtroom, preventing him from following proceedings or instructing his lawyers.

The warnings of Christine Assange and the doctors underscore the urgency of the fight for Assange’s immediate and unconditional freedom. The reports demonstrate that this struggle is inseparable from the defence of the social and democratic rights of the working class, including to high-quality healthcare.

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