

Doctors condemn Australian government's refusal to defend Julian Assange

By Oscar Grenfell
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In a letter publicly released today, almost 200 eminent doctors from around the world have condemned the Australian government's refusal to defend imprisoned journalist and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, warning that he faces heightened medical risks due to the rapidly expanding coronavirus pandemic.

The Doctors4Assange group wrote to the Australian government on December 15 and February 1 to insist that it immediately fulfil its obligations to Assange as an Australian citizen. It outlined the assessment of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer, that Assange is showing medically-verifiable symptoms of psychological torture and warned that his life was in danger if he was not urgently released from Belmarsh Prison to a university teaching hospital.

The correspondence, which was also sent to the Labor Party opposition, went unanswered for months.

On February 18, Mat Kimberley, the assistant secretary for consular operations at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), finally replied on behalf of the government. His letter is a tissue of lies and evasions.

Kimberley blithely stated that the "Australian government rejects any suggestion by the UN Rapporteur on Torture that it is complicit in psychological torture or has shown a lack of consular support for Mr. Assange." He made an offhand dismissal of the professional opinion of the doctors that Assange has not received adequate medical care.

Kimberley described the imprisonment of Assange in a maximum-security facility designed to hold terrorists and murderers as "appropriate." He declared the government's confidence that "Mr. Assange will receive due process in the legal proceedings he faces in the UK and we are likewise confident that he would

receive due process should he face legal proceedings in the US."

The DFAT bureaucrat's declarations amount to a greenlight for the torture of an Australian citizen and journalist whose only "crime" has been to expose illegal wars, global diplomatic conspiracies and human rights violations. Given that Labor has ignored the doctors' letters and has played a central role in the US-led pursuit of Assange, Kimberley's statements can only be read as a bipartisan endorsement of the illegal persecution of an Australian citizen.

The Australian government's response was issued after months of complaints by Assange's lawyers that he was being denied the right to prepare his own defence. It was sent on the eve of the first week of British court hearing for Assange's extradition to the US, which can only be described as a show trial. The WikiLeaks founder was repeatedly stripped naked and handcuffed, his legal documents were stolen by prison guards and he was isolated in a bullet-proof glass box at the back of the courtroom, preventing him from participating in the hearing.

In their latest letter, the doctors' cite the assessment of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute that Assange's treatment was "shocking and disproportionate," and may have constituted a breach of his right to a fair trial and a violation of international law.

Kimberley falsely claimed that the Australian government was powerless to intervene in the legal processes of another country. In reality, the government has a clear legal responsibility and considerable powers to intervene when an Australian citizen is facing political persecution abroad. It has done so on many occasions, especially when the countries involved are in the crosshairs of US imperialism, such as Iran and

China.

The government's "confidence" that Assange will receive "due process" in the US is absurd and reveals the political character of its refusal to defend the WikiLeaks founder.

Assange has been the subject of a secret US Grand Jury for the past decade. If he is extradited, he will be tried in Eastern District of Virginia. The location has been selected because it is home to the largest concentration of government agents in the US. Assange would be tried in a sealed court, with a jury stacked full of CIA operatives, that has a 100 percent conviction rate in national-security cases. He faces a sentence of up to 175 years imprisonment in conditions of total isolation.

The DFAT official asserted that the government could no longer provide Assange with "consular assistance" because he had withdrawn his consent. Such unspecified "consular assistance" is worthless, under conditions in which the government has already declared that it will take no action to protect Assange's rights. Its only purpose would be to allow Australian officials to monitor him and pass over information to Assange's persecutors in the US.

The doctors correctly noted that the issue of "consular assistance" was a "red herring." They wrote: "In the case that an Australian citizen's human rights are being abused, including his human right to health, his right to be free from torture and arbitrary detention, his right to a fair trial, his right to lawyer-client confidentiality and his right to prepare a defence, we are reliably advised that, consular assistance aside, government ministers can advocate for due legal process, and raise concerns about gross violations of rights with their overseas counterparts."

The doctors continued: "In Julian Assange's case, all of the above human rights have been violated, in a manner that endangers his health and contributes to his prolonged psychological torture as assessed by the UN Rapporteur on Torture and two medical experts specialised in the assessment and documentation of torture. These surely are matters in which Government ministers have not only the ability but the obligation to raise concerns about gross violations of rights with their UK counterparts."

They noted, moreover, that according to the "Australian government's own Human Rights

Commission, the federal government has the overall legal responsibility for ensuring that Australian citizens' human rights are protected." It is the assessment not only of the UN rapporteur and the doctors, but of rights and civil liberties organisations internationally, that Assange's legal and human rights are being trampled on.

The exchange is a damning indictment of the entire Australian political establishment. In their commitment to the US-Australia military alliance and Washington's predatory wars and military preparations, the Australian parliamentary parties have signalled their support for political persecution and lawlessness.

The lies contained in Kimberley's letter are the latest in a string of fabrications and evasions used by successive Australian governments to justify their refusal to defend Assange. This began with the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard, which in 2010 branded WikiLeaks as an organisation conducting "illegal activity," falsely asserted that Assange had broken Australian laws and pledged to assist the US campaign against him.

The doctors' letter makes clear that the Australian government, and all of the states participating in the persecution of Assange, have placed his life at risk.

The doctors stated that "with the president of the Prison Governors' Association warning that prisons provide 'fertile breeding grounds' for coronavirus, Julian Assange's life and health are at heightened risk due to his arbitrary detention during this global pandemic."

They concluded by insisting that the Australian government "heed not only the doctors' warnings, but those of respected legal and human rights bodies and authorities, many of which are calling for the US extradition request to be denied and Julian Assange's incarceration and extradition trial to be ceased, in the name not only of medical ethics, but human rights and rule of law."

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