

Growing demands for Assange's release as first coronavirus case confirmed in British prisons

By Oscar Grenfell
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There are mounting calls from Julian Assange's family, along with journalists and defenders of democratic rights, for his immediate release from London's Belmarsh Prison after the first coronavirus case was confirmed in the British penitentiary system on Wednesday.

The British government responded to the demands for Assange's freedom, and for measures to protect the safety of all prisoners, with unconcealed indifference. A Prison Services spokesman told the *Daily Mail* on Tuesday: "We are not planning to release any prisoners as a result of COVID-19."

The statement followed a call from the Appeal charity for the release of hundreds of inmates, including remand prisoners charged with non-violent offences, those with underlying health issues and those aged over 70.

Appeal's director Emily Bolton stated: "In this country, a prison sentence is supposed to be a deprivation of liberty; not a death sentence. Prisoners are part of families and our community, and those families and communities are desperately worried about their loved ones behind bars."

The stark warning came after an inmate at the Strangeways Prison in Manchester tested positive on Wednesday. Last week, Andrea Albutt, president of the Prison Governors Association, stated that prisoners "will die" as a result of the pandemic. Health experts have warned of a mass coronavirus outbreak under conditions of overcrowding, limited medical care and poor sanitation.

The refusal to release Assange is particularly criminal. He has not been convicted of any offence, but is being detained in a maximum-security facility at the

behest of the American government. He is a political prisoner, incarcerated solely to facilitate hearings for his extradition to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and life imprisonment for publishing evidence of war crimes.

Assange's poor health, moreover, is well documented. Since last November, eminent doctors from around the world have warned that he is being denied adequate medical care. Their statements, warning that Assange could die if he is not moved from Belmarsh Prison to a university teaching hospital, have been ignored by the British government and the Labour Party opposition.

The findings of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer that Assange is exhibiting medically-verifiable symptoms of torture after ten years of persecution, also have been dismissed by the British and Australian authorities.

As early as 2015, doctors treating Assange in London's Ecuador embassy stated that his health was in such a compromised state that anything more than a mild illness could threaten his life. Since then, he has experienced an additional five years of government abuse and his medical condition has deteriorated further.

Last week, Christine Assange, the WikiLeaks publisher's mother, again called for his immediate release. She noted that some low-security prisons in the US had begun releasing non-violent detainees in response to the pandemic.

"My journalist son Julian Assange is detained in the UK's Belmarsh Prison without charge," she wrote, adding that he was "weak from chronic ill health. He must be released too to save his life."

More than 7,300 people have signed an online petition demanding Assange's immediate release. It notes that there is a high probability that prison authorities will shortly suspend all visits. This, it warns, would further affect Assange's psychological health, which has been damaged by prolonged periods of isolation during his arbitrary detention.

The petition states: "As a vulnerable prisoner whose health is already in jeopardy further isolation would be damaging in itself, let alone the threat that the virus breaks out inside the prison. The increased health risk means he should be released immediately."

It continues: "Releasing him and other vulnerable prisoners would reduce the risk of outbreak of the virus inside the prison. Julian Assange should be with his family during this time where he can prepare his defense against his extradition hearing."

The petition was initiated after a statement by WikiLeaks' ambassador Joseph Farrell, declaring: "With the authorities about to end social visits it's essential that Julian Assange be included in any release policy. His health is already in jeopardy and further isolation would be damaging in itself, let alone the threat that he might contract the virus itself."

The sharpest comments were made on Twitter by Stefania Maurizi, a prominent journalist who has collaborated with WikiLeaks over the past decade.

An Italian citizen who has commented frequently on the devastating impact of the pandemic in that country, Maurizi wrote: "I am absolutely convinced we should get Julian Assange leaving Belmarsh Prison immediately and before it is too late for him. I am terrified he can die in prison due to the coronavirus epidemic. We know how terrible prisons are when it comes to health."

Maurizi noted that Iran, which is frequently vilified by the British government, has released some political prisoners amid the spread of coronavirus. Even the authoritarian dictatorship in Azerbaijan had begun taking similar measures.

Comments from health experts demonstrate that the warnings are no exaggeration. An article by three prominent British medical professionals on the *Conversation* today states: "Prison environments can create a perfect storm for spreading disease. Inmates often live in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions with limited access to healthcare." It notes the high

incidence of underlying diseases and health issues within the prison population, and the inability of prisoners to self-isolate.

A 2018 parliamentary report, for instance, found that 15 percent of British prisoners suffered respiratory issues. Some 10 of 35 men's prisons failed to comply with minimum standards of cleanliness and hygiene. A prisoner's mother, cited in the *Guardian* today, stated that despite the pandemic, inmates are being forced to use communal hot water for drinks, along with other shared amenities.

The willful endangerment of Assange's life is a continuation of the attempts by the British, US and Australian governments to destroy the WikiLeaks publisher. This intent was exemplified in the first week of the US extradition hearings, which began on February 18. Assange was repeatedly strip-searched 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 court-room, preventing him from participating in the proceedings.

As Craig Murray, a prominent WikiLeaks collaborator stated, the transparent purpose was to intensify the prolonged psychological torture to which Assange has been subjected.

Murray noted that Assange's degrading treatment followed court-tendered documents warning that he was at risk of committing suicide. He wrote: "I believe that the Hannibal Lecter style confinement of Assange, this intellectual computer geek, which has no rational basis at all, is a deliberate attempt to drive Julian to suicide."

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