

Intensive CIA spying on Assange targeted his infant child

By Oscar Grenfell
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Spanish daily *El País* and the Italian newspaper *Fatto Quotidiano* this week revealed new details of the intensive surveillance and dirty tricks operations targeting WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange while he was a political refugee in Ecuador's London embassy.

Both articles indicated that a particular focus of the spying, which was allegedly orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency, was identifying Assange's immediate family members. It raises the ominous possibility that plans were afoot to harm Assange's relatives, including his infant child.

The reports are the latest exposures of the spying, which was conducted by UC Global, a private Spanish firm contracted by the Ecuadorian authorities to provide security to the embassy building.

The company's director David Morales, a former Spanish military officer, is accused of having met with US authorities in early 2015 and agreed to secretly furnish the CIA with material gathered within the embassy in an operation that escalated over the ensuing three years.

Morales was arrested last year and charged with a raft of offenses, including over the surveillance. Assange has taken out a criminal complaint against the mercenary over the activities, which allegedly breached the legally-enshrined right to attorney-client privilege, along with the privacy of Assange and dozens of others.

Last week, Stella Morris, a 37-year-old lawyer, revealed that she has been in a personal relationship with Assange since 2015 and that the couple have two young children together.

The *El País* report indicates that the younger child, Gabriel, born in 2017 while Assange was still in the embassy, was a particular focus of UC Global's surveillance.

The Spanish-daily stated that detailed reports were prepared on Morris' visits to and from the embassy. Stephen Hoo, a friend of Assange, often brought Gabriel to the building and was also subjected to surveillance. Hoo's relationship status and even his sexual orientation were

scrutinised.

El País wrote: "Morales's suspicion was that a minor who entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London hanging on a baby carrier carried by actor Stephen Hoo could be the son of the cyber-activist (48 years old) and Morris (37 years old)."

UC Global was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to identify the paternity of the baby. An anonymous ex-employee of the company confirmed that UC Global had considered stealing one of the infant's used diapers or a pacifier to test for DNA.

The former employee stated: "They wanted to prove that it was his son to try to harm him. One got to speak with three laboratories in Madrid to see how the parental issue could be accredited. One of the labs told us that DNA could not be obtained from the stool. Then they tried to get his pacifier."

It is not clear whether the witness meant that UC Global intended to "harm" Assange, the baby or both. However given the sordid history of the CIA, nothing can be excluded. Morris stopped bringing Gabriel to the embassy after being alerted by an employee of the operation and has since stated that she feared for his safety.

Writing in *Fatto Quotidiano*, longtime WikiLeaks collaborator Stefania Maurizi revealed that the targeting of Morris and her young family extended far beyond the walls of the embassy. Maurizi cited an email by Morales to his staff, ordering them to pay "special attention" to Morris. It noted that the company believed that Morris was not her original name. The lawyer had, in fact, legally changed her name to avoid the operations of the intelligence agencies.

Morales wrote: "If necessary I want a person fully dedicated to this activity, so if you have to hire someone to do it, tell me. All this has to be considered top secret so that the diffusion is limited."

In other words, UC Global was apparently planning to assign a full-time investigator to follow Morris. Morales also stated that the company had identified a relative of her mother in Catalonia, in an indication that the company was seeking to track down Morris' family members around the

world.

There have been previous indications that UC Global, acting on behalf of the CIA, was not only seeking to monitor every aspect of Assange's life, but also plotting physical attacks against him.

In the most detailed public overview of the embassy spying, Andy Müller-Maguhn, a German computer expert and close collaborator of Assange, explained that the UC Global operation dramatically escalated in 2017.

In December that year, Morales ordered that staff conduct a "survey" of the building, aimed in part at finding new areas where hidden cameras and microphones could be placed, in a bid to overcome measures Assange had taken to stymie the spying.

Most ominously, Morales also passed on to his staff a request from his "American friends" for a list of potential physical access points to the embassy. According to Müller-Maguhn, Morales asked his employees "about the possibility of leaving the door of the diplomatic mission open, arguing that it was an accidental mistake, to allow the entry and kidnapping of the asylum-seeker."

The timing of these CIA operations is significant. They followed WikiLeaks' publication, beginning in March 2017, of Vault 7, a vast trove of CIA documents exposing the global spying and hacking operations of the agency.

Then CIA director and current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo immediately responded by branding WikiLeaks a "hostile non-state intelligence agency." At the same time, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation put together a "counter-espionage squad" to investigate WikiLeaks. Its work would culminate in the issuing of 18 charges against Assange, including 17 under the Espionage Act.

FBI special agent Megan Brown, who played a leading role in the taskforce, filed an affidavit against Assange, laying the basis for at least some of the charges against him, in December 2017.

In other words, at the same time that the CIA and its proxies were violating the privacy of Assange's family and considering illegally kidnapping the WikiLeaks founder, the FBI and the Justice Department were finalising a legal case against him.

Morales appears to have played a central role in both. *El País* previously reported that metadata from Morales' emails placed him in Alexandria, Virginia, on March 1 and 2, 2017. This was just weeks after the establishment of the FBI squad. Alexandria is home to the largest concentration of intelligence employees in the US and was, at the time, the site of a secret grand jury impaneled to help concoct charges against Assange.

The close connection between illegal activities targeting Assange and his infant child, and the preparations for a US

indictment of the WikiLeaks founder, further underscores the fact that he is the subject of what can only be termed an attempted extraordinary rendition. The charges and the formal extradition process are only a figleaf for a CIA operation aimed at destroying Assange because of his exposure of US government crimes.

As he awaits a show trial for his extradition to the US, scheduled to resume on May 18, Assange faces the imminent danger of being infected by the coronavirus pandemic as it sweeps through Britain's prison system.

Earlier this month, Magistrate Vanessa Baraitser rejected an application for Assange to be released from Belmarsh Prison on bail, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime and suffers from a raft of medical issues, rendering him vulnerable to COVID-19.

Maurizi published portions of Morris' previously unreleased statement to the bail hearing. Morris stated: "I have feared with strong reason for a long time that I will lose Julian to suicide if there is no way in which he can stop his extradition to the USA. I now fear I may lose him for different reasons and sooner to the virus. I know very well that his health is extremely poor and can detail the different aspects of that poor health."

Morris outlined the dire impact that long stretches of effective solitary confinement in Belmarsh had on Assange. "When in the Healthcare unit he was taken from a ward into a single cell for many months in a form of isolation save for a very few hours each day I noticed how he, as I described at the time was visibly 'very diminished... like a withering flower.'"

Baraitser was unmoved, decreeing not only that Assange must remain behind bars, but also that it would be in the "public interest" for Morris and her young children to be named in the media, denying their right to anonymity.

The author also recommends:

Julian Assange's partner Stella Morris speaks out: "His life is on the brink"

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