

# Online documentary exposes the psychological torture of Julian Assange

By Oscar Grenfell  
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Last night, the “Don’t Extradite Assange” group held an online premiere of “Not in our name,” a short documentary reviewing the medical consequences of the decade-long persecution of Julian Assange and its implications for democratic rights globally.

The event was part of the ongoing campaign against the imprisonment of the WikiLeaks founder in Britain’s maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, where he continues to be imperilled by the coronavirus pandemic. It was held in the lead-up to scheduled September hearings for Assange’s extradition to the US, where he faces life imprisonment for exposing American war crimes.

The documentary, directed by John Furse, makes able use of archival footage and original interviews to present a concise and irrefutable summation of the abuses Assange has suffered at the hands of multiple governments, and the basic issues at stake, including press freedom and the struggle against imperialist war.

Unlike many treatments of the Assange case in the corporate media, “Not in our name” places the WikiLeaks founder’s plight firmly in the context of the publications for which Assange faces charges in the US.

It begins with a brief review of the media organisation’s 2010 releases, which revealed mass civilian killings in Iraq and Afghanistan and other violations of international law.

Footage from the time demonstrates the hysterical response of the US military-intelligence and political establishment.

Kenneth Weinstein, president of the Hudson Institute, a neo-conservative think-tank, is shown declaring that it was “very important for our government” to display “no patience for the kind of so-called whistleblowing activities of traitors.”

At a 2010 media appearance, Assange reveals that the US government had demanded that WikiLeaks “destroy our archives relating to the Pentagon and stop dealing with US military whistleblowers,” or “be coerced.”

Emails between leading personnel at Stratfor, a security company with close ties to the CIA, had outlined a plan to “Move him [Assange] from country to country to face various charges for the next 25 years,” culminating in his imprisonment alongside terrorists in a super-max US facility.

Very rapidly, Assange was embroiled in the British legal

system on the basis of bogus Swedish allegations of sexual misconduct, which were intended as a backdoor to dispatch him to the US. This compelled the WikiLeaks founder to seek political asylum in Ecuador’s London embassy in 2012.

The bulk of the documentary is an elaboration of UN Special Rapporteur Nils Melzer’s finding that Assange displays medically-verifiable symptoms of psychological torture as a result of his protracted persecution. This assessment is based on a consultation Melzer and two medical experts held with Assange at Belmarsh Prison in May, 2019, and on the UN official’s extensive study of the legal abuses inflicted on the WikiLeaks founder.

The film outlines several features of the UN’s definition of psychological torture, as they were displayed in Assange’s treatment:

\* **Constant fear and anxiety:** Assange has faced the prospect of being sent to the US, where he could potentially be subjected to the death penalty, for ten years. Over that period he has been arbitrarily-detained, brutally arrested and held in a maximum-security prison, while senior US government figures have called for his murder.

Australian clinical psychologist Doctor Lissa Johnson told viewers: “Often it is the anticipation of the danger you’re frightened of that is experienced as more traumatic and tormenting than the actual materialisation of that threat.”

\* **Public vilification:** In his initial findings, Melzer stated that Assange had been the victim of an unprecedented campaign of “public mobbing,” involving innumerable slanders from governments and corporate media outlets.

Doctor Derek Summerfield, a leading retired psychologist, explained that this served to “isolate a person further from their sense of who they are and what they’re all about, and to smear their name in such a way as to make it easier to do what the state wishes to do with this person.”

Lissa Longstaff, of Women Against Rape, outlined the manner in which the Swedish allegations were the subject of “state manipulation.” They had served, not only as a pretext for the abrogation of Assange’s rights, but also as the foundation of a systematic smear campaign.

\* **Loss of autonomy:** This was particularly evident when the new Ecuadorian government turned against Assange as it

established closer relations with the US in 2017. Assange, despite being a political refugee, was constantly spied upon by a private security firm acting on instructions from the CIA, faced the threat of being evicted from the embassy at any moment, and had his communications cut off, thereby further isolating him.

\* **Helplessness and hopelessness:** Johnson noted that the multiple legal abuses inflicted on Assange, including the illegal revocation of his political asylum and his knowledge that he faced biased political and judicial authorities in Britain, had created a situation in which “anything can happen. It’s deeply destabilising. You don’t know how you can defend yourself, you don’t know what to expect next.”

This had been intensified since Assange’s arrest in April, 2019. He had been denied adequate medical care in Belmarsh Prison, prevented from participating in his own defence and subjected to a series of British hearings that had the character of show-trials.

\* **Isolation and sensory deprivation:** Through most of his imprisonment by Britain, Assange has been detained in solitary confinement. This has continued, even as he has been held on remand solely to facilitate the US extradition request.

In summing up the consequences, Johnson noted: “We’re designed for short bursts of stress, but when it is constant and relentless, it causes very serious problems with immunity. Immune cells can self-destruct, your body stops producing them, communication in the immune system breaks down. That can render people susceptible to cancer, to atypical infections and renders them very vulnerable to coronavirus.

“These techniques are essentially designed to break someone down so much they don’t want to live, they can’t function.”

Assange’s friend Vaughan Smith recalled that when the WikiLeaks founder called him last Christmas Eve, he had warned that he was “slowly dying” in Belmarsh Prison.

After the screening, Rebecca Vincent, London director of Reporters Sans Frontières, hosted a discussion with Melzer and filmmaker John Furse.

Melzer again rejected any suggestion that psychological torture was “torture lite.” He noted that in physical torture, the infliction of violence is a means, not an end in itself. Like psychological torture, its purpose is to “affect and break a person’s mind. You break their body in order to reach their mind.

“The actual target of any act of torture is the mind. It’s always psychological... You can achieve that through physical pain or non-physical pain and suffering. So isolation, combined with humiliation, combined with intimidation, combined with a profound arbitrariness, targets very specifically innate needs of stability, security, orientation and identity... These are confirmed psychological needs that are much closer to our identity than even our body.”

Melzer stated that the vilification of Assange had been aimed at deflecting attention from the state crimes revealed by

WikiLeaks. Referring to slanders directed against Assange, he said: “We’re discussing cats and skateboards, but we are not discussing things which have been documented as war crimes.”

Asked about the response to his findings, Melzer said that while governments “grudgingly tolerated” him for now, despite their blithe dismissal of his judgements, he had been told that there would be a “political price to pay” for his exposures.

The UN official noted the way in which international legal norms had been eroded over the previous years: “We have been privatising public service for 40 years, and now we have almost been privatising governments. We have privatised prisons, armies, police, so it’s no wonder governments think they are private.”

Furse also stated that the Assange case had revealed the power of major financial interests, and their undermining of democratic rights.

Explaining the broader significance of Assange’s persecution, Melzer declared: “The real purpose of torture, most of the time, is intimidation. And it is not necessarily intimidation of the victim. It’s intimidation of everybody else. That’s why people are tortured in public places, women are raped in the village square in armed conflicts and people are being executed publicly.

“That is what is happening to Julian Assange. It’s not about punishing him [or] interrogating him and finding the truth. It’s about intimidating all other journalists and publishers and making sure that no-one does what he has done, because that’s what states are afraid of.”

Melzer warned “this purpose has already been achieved,” which meant that “this fight is really to re-establish press freedom, rather than just protecting it.”

*The event can be viewed in full at Consortium News here.*

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