

To His Excellency Prime Minister Rishi Sunak
and
Lord Cancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, The Right Honourable Mr. Alex Chalk

15. February, 2024

Your Excellences

The plight of WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, has reached a critical stage, as his last and final hearing approaches at London's High Court on February 20th and 21st. The outcome will determine whether Assange can appeal an earlier decision, allowing the UK to extradite him to the US. Under the Espionage Act charges, Assange could face up to 175 years in prison in the US for publishing war crimes committed by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. This excessive punishment and the violations of human rights facing Assange are of deepest concern and is nothing short of a death sentence.

Several experts including UN Rapporteur Swiss Nils Melzer and lately UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Australian Dr. Alice Jill Edwards, have urged the UK Government to halt his extradition due to grave concerns about Assange's mental health and potential exposure to torture. The UN experts highlight his long-standing depression and his heightened risk of self-harm, which will be exacerbated by potential solitary confinement in the US.

Julian Assange has been imprisoned in the HM prison Belmarsh since 2019, incarcerated on a 50 day breach of bail charge.

It is high time to intervene in a case that has grave consequences, not only for Julian Assange, but for the security and protection of journalists and publishers worldwide. Should the extradition of Julian Assange take place this would open the door for further prosecutions of those who seek to disclose malpractice and human rights abuses by those in power by criminalising legitimate journalistic practice. In essence these practices are a) encouraging sources to provide information, b) protecting their anonymity and c) using secure means of communications. It will set a precedent allowing any foreign government to pursue journalists and publishers who speak out against them.

We, the undersigned organisations, calls for the withdrawal of the extradition request from the US Government. In addition we urge the UK courts to reject the extradition request and grant Assange immediate release from HM prison Belmarsh.

WikiLeaks/Julian Assange published classified material provided by whistle-blower Chelsea Manning, then a military analyst in the US army, which revealed evidence of human rights violations and possible war crimes committed by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US Espionage act of 1917 was designed to punish spies and traitors working with foreign governments during wartime. Using it to sentence Chelsea Manning to 35 years in prison was in itself a threat to critical publishing. Manning has since been pardoned. The fact that Julian Assange could face decades behind bars would cause a chilling effect on critical journalism seeking to expose the truth about crimes committed by governments. The fact that a government decides that a specific document is secret or confidential does not make it so, and on many occasions the public's right to know overrides the state's desire to keep matters secret, such as evidence of human rights violations or corruption.

Sincerely,

Danish PEN

Norwegian PEN

International Media Support

The Danish Association of Journalists

DiEM25 Denmark