



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 8, 2024

UN Warns Assange Could be Tortured if Extradited to U.S.

The UN's special rapporteur on torture has called upon authorities in the U.K. to prevent Julian Assange's possible extradition to the United States to face espionage charges.

The U.K. could be breaching human rights laws by turning the WikiLeaks founder over to the United States, due to his vulnerable mental state, UN expert Alice Jill Edwards warned on Tuesday.

Before Assange's final appeal against extradition this month, Edwards had warned that Assange's "precarious mental health status" could mean that transferring him to U.S. custody could endanger his health.



AP Images
Julian Assange

"Julian Assange suffers from long-standing and recurrent depressive disorder," Edwards said in a statement published on the website of the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on February 6. "He is assessed as being at risk of committing suicide."

Assange, now 52, rose to international prominence in 2010 when he published a series of leaks from U.S. Army intelligence operative Chelsea Manning in what was referred to as the largest disclosure of classified documents in history. He faces up to 175 years in prison if convicted of a series of espionage charges.

Edwards added that Assange is also at "risk of being placed in prolonged solitary confinement" and could receive a "potentially disproportionate sentence" in a U.S. courtroom if extradition is granted.

She also urged London to ensure "full compliance with the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of refoulement to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

A final decision on Assange's possible extradition is expected to be made in London's High Court on February 20 and 21. He faces a total of 18 criminal counts in the United States over his supposed role in leaking classified documents via the WikiLeaks platform, including some that exposed alleged war crimes.

Assange has been lauded by his supporters as an anti-establishment hero who is being persecuted for exposing U.S. military wrongdoing, and his prosecution would be seen as an attack on journalism and free speech.

"The last four and a half years have taken the most considerable toll on Julian and his family, including our two young sons," Assange's wife, Stella, whom he married in prison, said last year. "The persecution of this innocent journalist and publisher must end."

Assange has been detained in the U.K. since 2019 and is currently being held at Belmarsh Prison in London. Prior to his detention, he spent nearly seven years in the Ecuadorian embassy in London after being granted political asylum by the South American country. The charges against him rise from his



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publication of classified material obtained by whistleblowers, including Pentagon documents detailing alleged U.S. war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than 250,000 diplomatic cables exposing U.S. efforts to — among other things — spy on its allies and meddle in foreign elections.

The Espionage Act has never before been used to prosecute someone who published — but did not steal — classified material. Assange and his supporters argue that WikiLeaks' publication of this material is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, a view shared by former U.S. president Barack Obama, whose Justice Department declined to press charges against the Australian as it concluded it had no legal grounds to do so.

Assange's extradition to the United States was approved in 2020 by then-U.K. home secretary Priti Patel. He lodged his final appeal against the decision in June of this year, after all eight grounds of a previous appeal were rejected by a High Court judge.

Last year, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said that he would continue to press the United States to stop its prosecution of Assange, despite U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken dismissing all previous pleas from Canberra for the wellbeing of its citizen.

"This has gone on for too long. Enough is enough," Albanese told reporters. "We remain very firm in our view and in our representations to the American government and we will continue to do so."

Albanese has made similar declarations before. He told Australia's ABC broadcaster in May last year that the Assange case needed "to be brought to a conclusion," and that his government was "working through diplomatic channels" to tackle the situation with Washington.

Blinken rejected Albanese's advocacy for Assange over the weekend. Speaking alongside Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong in Brisbane, Blinken claimed that Assange's alleged actions "risked very serious harm to our national security, to the benefit of our adversaries, and put named human sources at grave risk — grave risk — of physical harm, and grave risk of detention."

Assange, he maintained, was "charged with very serious criminal conduct" and had allegedly participated in "one of the largest compromises of classified information in the history of our country."

Blinken's statement was "consistent with what the American position has been" in private, Albanese said. However, he said he would not drop the issue with his American counterparts.

Joshua Schulte, a former CIA software engineer who allegedly gave a massive trove of classified information to WikiLeaks, was also sentenced to 40 years in prison by a New York judge. U.S. District Court Judge Jesse Furman handed down the sentence against Schulte on February 1, falling short of the life sentence that federal prosecutors had requested. Schulte, who was accused of staging the largest theft of U.S. secrets in the CIA's history, was convicted on charges of espionage, computer hacking, contempt of court, making false statements to the FBI, and possessing child pornography.

Schulte, 35, was the source behind the so-called Vault 7 release by WikiLeaks in 2017, which unveiled the methods used by the CIA to hack smartphones and other devices. The bombshell report exposed how the United States spied on foreign governments, terrorism suspects, and other targets. The release also reportedly triggered a secret CIA plot to kidnap or assassinate Assange.

Prior to his arrest in 2018, Schulte had helped create the hacking tools that he later revealed to WikiLeaks. The CIA tactics included efforts to turn so-called smart TVs — televisions with online connectivity — into listening devices. Prosecutors claimed he was behind "the most damaging disclosures of classified information in American history."



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Schulte argued during his July 2022 trial that the CIA and FBI were scapegoating him for a data leak that could have been stolen by hundreds of other people. He also claimed that he had no motive to stage the leak. During his sentencing hearing, he bemoaned the horrible conditions in his New York jail cell, which he called a “torture cage,” and he claimed prosecutors were seeking “vengeance” after previously offering him a plea bargain calling for a 10-year prison sentence. Furman found that Schulte was driven by “anger, spite and perceived grievance” against his CIA bosses after they ignored his complaints about working conditions. After being jailed in 2018, the ex-programmer continued trying to leak classified materials in what prosecutors called an “information war” with the U.S. government, the judge said.



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