

Julian Assange extradition verdict to be delivered in January



London, October 2 (RHC)-- After hearing four weeks of evidence in the extradition trial of Julian Assange, District Judge Vanessa Baraitser announced on Thursday she will pronounce judgement on January 4th.

The WikiLeaks founder's trial in London's Central Criminal Court, also known as the Old Bailey, started on September 7th. Australian-born Assange has been charged under the U.S.'s 1917 Espionage Act for "unlawfully obtaining and disclosing classified documents related to the national defense."

The case marks the first time in United States history that publishing information is being charged under the Espionage Act. Assange has been indicted on 17 spying charges and one charge of computer hacking regarding the publication of secret military documents.

The hacking charge was included recently -- meaning that the defense had no witness to appropriately deal with the hacking allegations.

As this stage of the hearing concluded, Nils Melzer, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, told Al Jazeera that he was “very worried” as Assange might face torture should be extradited to the United States -- a key argument of the defense. “The judge excluded witnesses who could testify on systematic torture in the U.S.,” he said.

According to Melzer, the new hacking charge has expanded the factual basis of the case and “opens the door to the bringing of new charges” by the US.

In an interview with Democracy Now, one of Assange’s lawyers, Jennifer Robinson, said the U.S. was “shifting the goalpost,” as she described the case as part of US President Donald Trump’s “attack on journalism.” The Department of Justice, she said, has tried to frame this as a hacking case when there is no evidence of hacking.

Assange is charged with conspiring with Chelsea Manning, a former Army intelligence analyst, to hack into a Pentagon computer network and publish the secret documents.

He has been kept in the UK’s high-security Belmarsh prison since April 2019. He first appeared in court in February but the case was pushed back because of the coronavirus pandemic. If convicted on all charges, he faces a possible 175 years in prison in the US.

Assange’s lawyers say the case is politically motivated, claiming in court documents that he would be unable to receive a fair trial in the United States. They argued that the case was driven by Trump, who is known for being hostile to the media.

“It is a clear press freedom case,” said Robinson. “The First Amendment is understood to protect the media in receiving and publishing that information in the public interest, which is exactly what WikiLeaks did.”

Over the past four weeks, the court heard from several witnesses. The first witness called in the case, Mark Feldstein, professor at the University of Maryland and former investigative reporter, testified that the passing of classified information to news organizations in the U.S. is common.

Another academic, Paul Rogers, professor at Bradford University told the court that WikiLeaks’ revelations were “significant” in showing how the US coalition’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were “going wrong” despite public claims of their success.

Anonymous witnesses, who worked for a Spanish security firm with a contract to protect the Ecuadorian embassy, have testified that Assange was bugged inside the embassy from 2017 onwards.

Many prominent world leaders and celebrities have come to Assange’s defense. Assange’s defence lawyers have continuously expressed concerns about his physical and mental health; he has threatened to commit suicide should he be extradited.

If extradited to the United States, he would likely face solitary confinement which would put him at a heightened risk of suicide, his team says.

The January 4 ruling will not necessarily end the case, since the losing side is likely to appeal the ruling. “Unless any further application for bail is made, and between now and the fourth of January, you will remain in custody for the same reasons as have been given to you before,” Baraitser told Assange, who was sitting behind a security screen in the court.



Radio Habana Cuba