

Swedish friend of Assange fights to clear his name in Ecuador

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Software developer Ola Bini, accused of hacking a computer system illegally, is expected back in court this month

Quito, January 5 (RHC)-- A Swedish software developer and digital privacy activist was arrested in April 2019 in Ecuador on allegations he accessed the computer system of a public institute without permission. For nearly 2 years, Ola Bini has been waiting for his day in court.

Ola Bini has denied the charge, which carries a three- to five-year prison sentence, while human rights and digital privacy groups have urged the Ecuadorian authorities to ensure the 38-year-old gets a fair trial free from political interference.

After a pre-trial judge on December 16th ruled that prosecutors had enough evidence against Bini to proceed to trial, his lawyer Carlos Soria said he expects the proceedings to resume in early January. “I know this case will go to trial,” Soria, who has previously called for the case to be dismissed on grounds of insufficient evidence and violations of due process, told Al Jazeera in a video interview on December 24. “In the trial, however, these accusations will not hold up.”

Bini’s arrest came only hours after Ecuador revoked immunity for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and evicted him from the country’s embassy in London, effectively turning him over to the British authorities.

In a news conference announcing Assange’s eviction, the Ecuadorian minister of interior at the time, Maria Paula Romo, said the country had “sufficient evidence” that a member of WikiLeaks close to Assange and living in Ecuador for many years was “attempting to destabilise the [Ecuadorian] government” alongside two Russian hackers.

Bini, who has lived in Ecuador since 2013, was arrested at the Mariscal Sucre International Airport in Quito hours later while waiting to board a flight to Japan for a planned martial arts camp. Police searched his apartment in the early morning hours of April 12, seizing a vast array of electronic devices and “books related to hacking.”

While Bini and Assange are friends and the two met multiple times during Assange’s asylum in the embassy, Bini has denied accusations that he worked for WikiLeaks or hacked computers and phones. “I protect systems, I don’t break them,” he said in an interview in September 2019.

The expected resumption of Bini’s case this month also coincides with a British judge’s decision on Monday on to refuse the United States’s request to extradite Assange to face espionage and hacking charges.

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