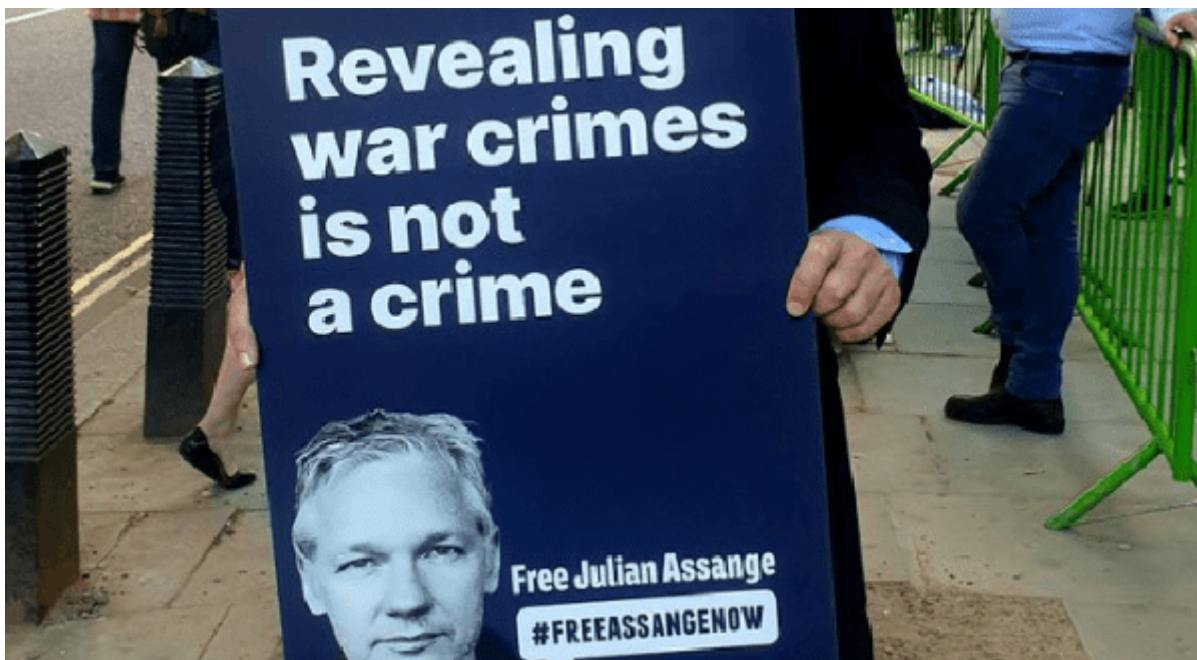


UK approves extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States



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London, June 17 (RHC)-- British Home Secretary Priti Patel has approved the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States to face trumped-up criminal charges, bringing his legal saga closer to a conclusion.

Assange is wanted by U.S. authorities on 18 counts, including a spying charge, relating to WikiLeaks' release of vast troves of confidential US military records and diplomatic cables which Washington claimed had put lives in danger, but without providing any proof of the allegation.

His supporters say he is an anti-establishment hero who has been victimized because he exposed U.S. war crimes in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that his prosecution is a politically motivated assault on journalism and free speech.

The Home Office said on Friday that his extradition had now been approved but he could still appeal the decision. WikiLeaks said he would. "In this case, the UK courts have not found that it would be

oppressive, unjust or an abuse of process to extradite Mr Assange,” the Home Office said in a statement.

“Nor have they found that extradition would be incompatible with his human rights, including his right to a fair trial and to freedom of expression, and that whilst in the U.S. he will be treated appropriately, including in relation to his health.”

Originally, a British judge ruled that Assange should not be deported, saying his mental health problems meant he would be at risk of suicide if convicted and held in a maximum-security prison.

But this was overturned on an appeal after the U.S. gave a package of assurances, including a pledge he could be transferred to Australia to serve any sentence.

Patel’s decision does not mean the end of Australian-born Assange’s legal battle which has been continuing for more than a decade. He can launch an appeal at London’s High Court which must give its approval for a challenge to proceed.

He can ultimately seek to take his case to the Supreme Court in the UK. But if an appeal is refused, Assange must be extradited within 28 days.

“This is a dark day for press freedom and for British democracy,” Assange’s wife Stella said. “Today is not the end of the fight. It is only the beginning of a new legal battle.”

Edward Snowden, who fled the U.S. after leaking secret National Security Agency files in 2013 and was given asylum in Russia, reacted to the news on Twitter, saying: “It is an appalling symbol of how far the British and American governments’ commitment to human rights has declined.”

Agnes Callamard, the secretary general of Amnesty International, a global rights group, said that “allowing Julian Assange to be extradited to the US would put him at great risk and sends a chilling message to journalists the world over”.

“If the extradition proceeds, Amnesty International is extremely concerned that Assange faces a high risk of prolonged solitary confinement, which would violate the prohibition on torture or other ill-treatment,” she said.

“Diplomatic assurances provided by the U.S. that Assange will not be kept in solitary confinement cannot be taken on face value given previous history.”

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