

Australian government urged to show courage against U.S. over charges against Julian Assange



Canberra, October 21 (RHC)-- Julian Assange is facing “a very dark” situation and the Australian government must show “courage” in pushing the US to drop the charges against the WikiLeaks co-founder, a leading human rights lawyer says.

Jennifer Robinson, who represents Assange, said she last saw her fellow Australian citizen during a visit to Belmarsh prison, in London, last month and indicated his health had been declining since he had a mini-stroke last year. “He’s just had COVID in prison and has been in 24-hour isolation,” Robinson said in an interview with Guardian Australia on Wednesday.

“As a result, we are very concerned about his ongoing physical and mental health difficulties – and that’s why this situation is so urgent. As his wife has said, we just don’t know how much longer he will last.”

Assange remains in Belmarsh prison as he fights a U.S. attempt to extradite him to face charges in connection with the publication of hundreds of thousands of leaked documents about the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as well as diplomatic cables.

Last week the attorney general, Mark Dreyfus, reiterated his view that the case against the Australian citizen had “gone on long enough” but cited private talks with the Biden administration as a reason for not commenting further.

Robinson, who has met several times with Dreyfus, said it was “encouraging” that the Albanese government was maintaining the position that it had adopted in opposition: that the case had dragged on too long and “enough is enough.” “What we now need to see is action,” said Robinson, a barrister with Doughty Street Chambers in London, who is currently visiting Australia.

“We continue to call on the Australian government to have the courage to raise this case and resolve it with our ally, to protect an Australian journalist and citizen. “That is what we expect them to do and what we will continue to ask them to do.”

Asked whether the Australian government was right to stick with a quiet diplomacy approach, Robinson said there was “always a place for private diplomacy and there is always a place for public advocacy.”

“We’re not privy to the private conversations that are happening so it’s impossible to be able to judge.” Robinson said recent rallies in support of Assange had given him “hope in a very dark situation.”

“The future ahead for Julian is grim. His extradition has been ordered. We’re waiting to see whether we’ll be permitted to appeal and he could be in prison for decades to come. As the evidence makes clear, if he is extradited to the U.S. and faces those prison conditions, it is a death sentence. It couldn’t be more serious than that.”

Robinson said the attempt to prosecute Assange under the US Espionage Act sets “an incredibly dangerous precedent for journalists, not just in the United States, but everywhere.” “What it will mean is that any journalist or publisher, anywhere in the world could face extradition and prosecution in the United States for publishing truthful information in the public interest,” she said.

Robinson later addressed the National Press Club in Canberra, imploring journalists to speak up about a plight of Assange because the indictment “criminalises routine journalistic practices.” She argued it represented “the most terrifying threat to freedom of speech in the 21st-century” and journalists would be “shooting yourselves in the foot” if they denied Assange was a journalist.

Robinson said the case had always been “political” and required a political solution, arguing that any appeals and court processes could drag on for at least another decade. After the event, Robinson was expected to greet a rally of Assange supporters alongside the whistleblower David McBride, lawyer

Bernard Collaery and members of the Parliamentary Friends of Julian Assange.

The U.S. embassy in Canberra has not commented on the issue, referring any questions to the U.S. Department of Justice, which has also generally not responded to requests. The White House has previously told reporters the Assange matter was an “ongoing criminal case” and the president, Joe Biden, was “committed to an independent Department of Justice.”

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