

Press freedom activists renew call for U.S. to drop charges against Julian Assange

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Protestors holding a "Free Assange" banner march around the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. on October 8, 2022. (Photo: Nathan Posner/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Washington, December 9 (RHC)-- Press freedom and rights organizations on Thursday expressed "grave concern" about the Biden administration's "relentless pursuit" of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, an Australian who is jailed in London while he fights against extradition to the United States.

"It is more than a year since our coalition sent a joint letter calling for the charges against Assange to be dropped," 21 groups wrote to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland. "Today, we repeat those concerns, and urge you to heed our request. We believe that the prosecution of Assange in the U.S. would set a harmful legal precedent and deliver a damaging blow to press freedom by opening the way for journalists to be tried under the Espionage Act if they receive classified material from whistleblowers."

President Joe Biden "has emphasized the important role that a free press plays in American democracy and around the world," the new letter says, noting reforms announced in October by his Department of Justice (DOJ). "We are grateful for these revisions, and urge you to further affirm the importance of press freedom by dropping the Justice Department's indictment against Assange and halting all efforts to extradite him to the U.S.," the letter to Garland continues. "It is time for the Biden administration to break from the Trump administration's decision to indict Assange—a move that was hostile to the media and democracy itself."

The groups asserted that not only is ending the prosecution of Assange "essential to protect journalists' ability to report freely on the United States without fear of retribution," but also the Biden administration's current position "undermines the country's ability to defend journalists against repression by authoritarian and other rights-abusing regimes abroad."

The letter's signatories include the ACLU, Amnesty International, Center for Constitutional Rights, Committee to Protect Journalists, Demand Progress Education Fund, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Fight for the Future, Free Press, Freedom of the Press Foundation, Human Rights Watch, PEN America, Reporters Without Borders, and RootsAction.

The letter comes just two days after Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg publicly revealed that Assange had sent him a backup of the materials leaked to him by former U.S. military analyst Chelsea Manning, which led to the DOJ's case against the WikiLeaks founder.

"I am now as indictable as Julian Assange and as everyone who put that information out—the papers, everybody who handled it," Ellsberg said, daring the DOJ to take action that could lead to the U.S. Supreme Court weighing in on what he argues is an unconstitutional use of the Espionage Act.

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