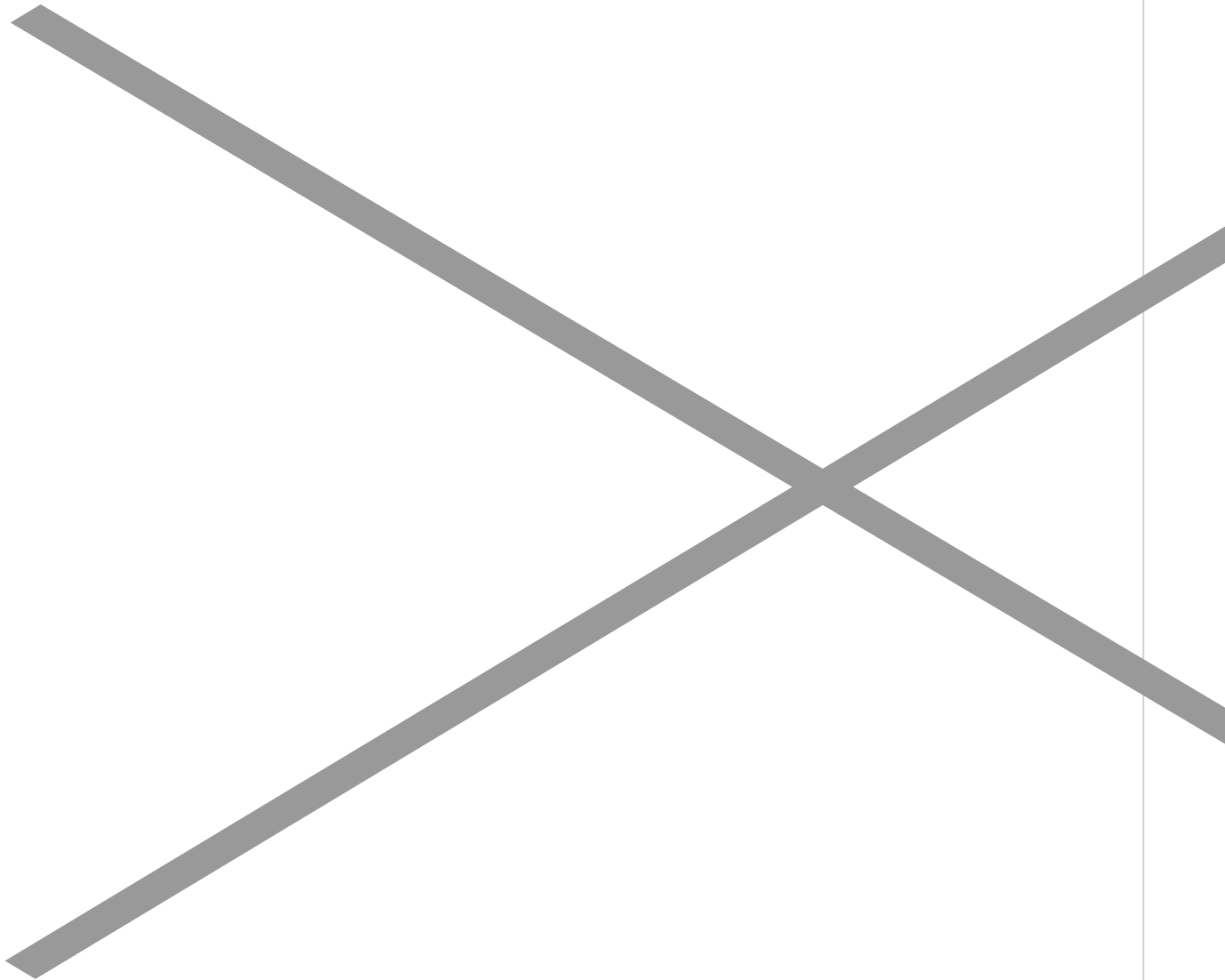


Pope Francis meets with Stella Assange, wife of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange

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Vatican City, July 1 (RHC)--Pope Francis on Friday granted an audience to the wife of Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks who is behind bars in Britain and battling extradition to the United States.

"The Holy Father has received in audience Mrs. Stella Assange, with family members," a Vatican statement said, with no further details.

Stella Assange tweeted that her family was "overwhelmed" by the private audience, with a photo of herself dressed in black in St. Peter's Square and the hashtag #FreeAssangeNOW.

She is fronting the campaign to have her husband released, but the Vatican did not say if this was discussed in the meeting or if Francis expressed any support for it. A Vatican spokesman said papal audiences are private affairs.

But, in an interview with The Associated Press after the audience, Stella Assange recalled that Pope Francis had sent a letter to her husband in March 2021, during a particularly difficult period.

"He has provided great solace and comfort and we are extremely appreciative for his reaching out to our family in this way," she told AP. "He understands that Julian is suffering and is concerned."

Assange is wanted in the U.S. over the release of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables in 2010. His prosecution is clearly a politically motivated assault on journalism and free speech.

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