

Australian lawmakers head to Washington to lobby against extradition of Julian Assange

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Barnaby Joyce, second left, and other members of a delegation to secure the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, speak to the media at Parliament House in Canberra, Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023.

Canberra, September 5 (RHC)-- A group of Australian lawmakers said Tuesday they would travel to Washington, DC this month to lobby the United States to abandon its efforts to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The delegation includes former Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce and five other lawmakers from across the political spectrum. Their trip is timed to draw attention to the issue ahead of a planned visit to

the White House in late October by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

Independent lawmaker and delegation member Monique Ryan told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. they represented a large group of lawmakers who feel "really, really strongly about the importance of securing Mr. Assange's freedom." Ryan said Assange was in poor health which made the matter more pressing.

Julian Assange, an Australian citizen, has spent the past four years in Britain's Belmarsh Prison fighting extradition to the U.S. He has been charged with espionage for publishing classified military and diplomatic cables through WikiLeaks. If found guilty, he could face a sentence of up to 175 years in prison.

The effort by the Australian lawmakers is the latest in a series of international moves raising questions about the extradition. Pope Francis met with Assange's wife Stella in June, which she said was evidence of his ongoing support for the family's plight. In May, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva denounced the lack of concerted efforts to free Assange.

Before he was incarcerated, Assange took asylum for seven years in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London in an attempt to avoid extradition to Sweden over sexual assault allegations. Sweden dropped that investigation in 2019 because there was no proof that he was guilty.

Greg Barns, a human rights lawyer and Assange campaign adviser, said most Australians believed the matter should come to an end. "Julian should be immediately reunited with his wife and children," Barns said. "That can only happen if the U.S. Department of Justice drops its extradition bid at once."

The delegation plans meet with members of the House and Senate as well as the State Department and Justice Department. They will also meet with organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Assange's brother Gabriel Shipton said even Australians who didn't support Assange's actions believed he had suffered enough and should be set free.

American prosecutors allege Assange helped U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning steal classified diplomatic cables and military files that WikiLeaks later published, putting lives at risk.

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