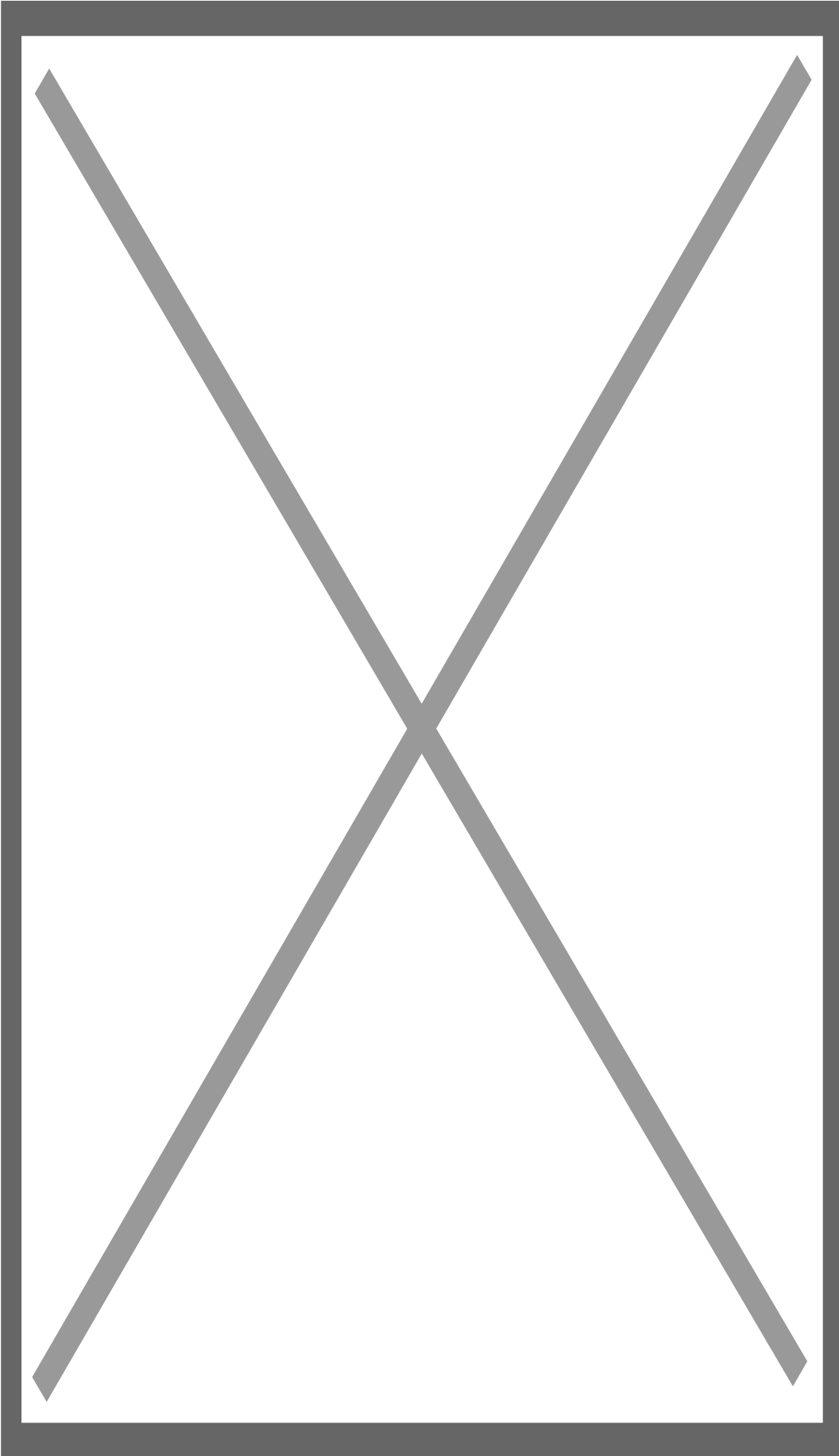


*Australian lawmakers call on
U.S. authorities to release Julian
Assange and drop extradition*

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Washington, September 21 (RHC)-- The parliamentary group urged the U.S. authorities. during a meeting at the Department of Justice, in Washington, to abandon their attempts to extradite Assange from a British prison to the United States, where he is accused of the publication through WikiLeaks of confidential documents. If extradited, the Australian journalist faces up to 175 years in prison.

A cross-party delegation of Australian parliamentarians who traveled to the United States to call for the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said it had held a fruitful discussion in Washington with the U.S. Justice Department.

The group urged U.S. authorities to abandon their attempts to extradite Assange from a British prison to the United States, where he is accused of publishing through WikiLeaks confidential U.S. military files and diplomatic documents.

"We had a fair hearing and a productive debate," Australian Congressman Peter Whish-Wilson said after the meeting.

The delegation included lawmakers from the Labor government, the opposition Liberal and National parties, and The Greens.

Labor lawmaker Tony Zappia said Australians believed Assange, an Australian national, had been punished enough and that his charges should be dropped. If the issue is not resolved, it will be detrimental to bilateral relations between Australia and the United States, Australian Greens representative David Shoebridge told reporters.

A group of Assange supporters gathered outside the Justice Department building where the meeting was held and hailed him as a journalist who should be reunited with his family.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese expressed frustration in May that a diplomatic solution had not been reached to end Assange's detention, and that he remained concerned about the journalist's mental health. Zappia said Albanese could raise the issue when he visits the United States next month. Support for Assange among U.S. policymakers remains weak.

If extradited, Assange faces up to 175 years in a maximum-security prison.

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