

Analysts say UK court ruling opens way for Julian Assange to be extradited to the United States soon



London, March 27 (RHC)-- A UK court on Tuesday ruled that Julian Assange should have the chance to appeal an order to extradite him to the United States. The High Court in London said that the WikiLeaks founder must have the right to challenge the British government's June 2022 extradition order, unless the United States provides within three weeks "assurances" that he would receive a fair trial and would not face the death penalty.

At the same time, the court rejected Assange's bid for an appeal based on the claim that the case against him is politically motivated.

The ruling suggests that the legal wrangling, which has been ongoing for more than a decade, will continue. Assange, who was not present in court to hear the ruling, has been detained in London's Belmarsh Prison since he was taken into custody during a raid of the Ecuadorian embassy in 2019.

U.S. prosecutors are seeking to put the 52-year-old on trial on 18 counts, all except one under the Espionage Act, over WikiLeaks's release of confidential U.S. military records and diplomatic cables.

Assange's lawyers in February sought permission to challenge the United Kingdom's approval of his extradition to the United States, arguing his prosecution was politically motivated. In their ruling, two senior judges said the Australian citizen had a real prospect of successfully appealing against extradition on a number of grounds.

The court said in its written ruling that as a non-U.S. national, Assange arguably would not be able to rely on the First Amendment right of free speech, and could later be charged with a capital offence. That, it said, could mean it would be unlawful to extradite him.

Judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson gave Washington three weeks to provide fresh assurances over concerns that he could be "prejudiced at trial" because he is not a US citizen and that he could face the death penalty if convicted. If those assurances are not forthcoming, then Assange will be granted permission to appeal, the ruling said.

A further hearing has been scheduled for May 20, meaning that Assange cannot be extradited immediately. His campaign team had warned that could have happened, depending on the ruling. Although offering Assange the possible chance to appeal, the court rejected the WikiLeaks founder's appeal bid on the basis that the case was politically motivated or that he would not receive a fair trial.

Al Jazeera's Jonah Hull, reporting from London, said: "The judges haven't thrown out the grounds for an appeal hearing, they have essentially upheld them. They basically said, 'Yes, we understand that there is a basis here for an appeal – however, we are going to defer a decision on that until May 20', when they called for a second hearing," Hull said.

WikiLeaks published an extract from the ruling that lists the "satisfactory assurances" the U.S. must provide for Assange's extradition to be granted.

"The court has given U.S. Gov 3 weeks to give satisfactory assurances: That Mr. Assange is permitted to rely on the First Amendment to the U.S. constitution; not prejudiced at trial by reason of his nationality; and that the death penalty is not imposed," it wrote.

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