

# *WikiLeaks founder's fate will be known in just 7 days -- on Monday, May 20*

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By Sam Varghese / Republished from iTWire, May 09, 2023

In just seven days, a British court will decide whether to extradite WikiLeaks founder and publisher Julian Assange to the U.S. where he will face trial on espionage charges.

The Australian came up before the British High Court in a two-day hearing on 20 and 21 March but was too ill to even appear physically before the court.

At the end of those two days of hearings, the High Court decided the U.S. must give assurances that Assange will not face the death penalty if he is extradited.

It gave Washington until mid-April to provide such an assurance before it made a final decision on whether Assange could launch an appeal against his extradition.

Additionally, the High Court also sought assurances as to whether Assange would be able to rely on free speech rights during any hearing in the US.

The U.S. provided these assurances on April 16, but there was a catch in what it said: While Assange would be able to “seek to rely” upon the U.S. Constitution’s provisions for free speech, “a decision as to the applicability of the First Amendment is exclusively within the purview of the U.S. courts.”

This means lawyers from both sides will be back at the High Court on 20 May before a decision is taken as to whether the Australian can appeal against his extradition.

Assange is still locked up in the maximum security Belmarsh Prison where he has spent the last 1854 days.

The Australian’s supporters said in a statement they were calling for his backers to assemble outside the court from 8.30am London time (11.30pm AEST) on 20 May.

“Should the court allow Julian’s extradition the only possibly bar to immediate extradition would be the European Court of Human Rights – although it is by no means certain that the court would intervene,” the statement said.

The statement noted that the decision would be announced in the shadow of World Press Freedom day, which was marked last week. “On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, Amnesty International warned ‘If Julian Assange is extradited to the US for publishing sensitive material leaked by others, the message to journalists and publishers everywhere is simple: you are not safe’,” the statement added.

It said the Australian “Bring Julian Assange Home” bipartisan parliamentary group had written directly to US President Joe Biden saying: “On World Press Freedom Day, we write as a group of Australian Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum seeking the freedom of Julian Assange.

“We write in the hope that Mr Assange, who has endured maximum security imprisonment in the UK’s Belmarsh Prison for more than five years without conviction on any substantial charge, can go free, can go home, can be reunited with his wife, children, and family.”

The statement pointed out that while the case was important in terms of press freedom and holding governments to account and more, it was also an ongoing personal tragedy.

“Julian has been detained in one form or another for over 13 years, the last five at the maximum security Belmarsh prison,” it noted. “Sharing a BBC World Service panel with Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe last week Stella Assange spoke of the terrible impact Julian’s continued unjust imprisonment has had on their two young children, Gabriel and Max, and the toll it was taking on them all, as the two women spoke about their shared experiences on unjust imprisonment.”

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has been silent about the case after April 11 when he leapt upon a throwaway remark from Biden about freedom for the WikiLeaks founder.

Biden was asked about Assange during an official visit to the US by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and offered an off-hand reply: “We’re considering it.”

Those three words appeared to have been manna from heaven for Albanese who has been reticent to make a forthright statement on the detention of an Australian citizen in the UK after America sought his extradition on espionage charges.

Albanese was quick to tell a TV interviewer that day after Biden's muttered comment: "This is an encouraging comment from President Biden. Enough is enough, there's nothing to be gained by Mr Assange's continued incarceration."

## SAM VARGHESE

Sam Varghese is an Australian of Indian origin who has lived in the country for nearly 26 years. He has worked as a journalist for more than 40 years and currently writes for the tech website iTWire. He has worked for the Deccan Herald and Indian Express in India, Khaleej Times in the UAE and Daily Commercial News (now defunct) and The Age in Australia.

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