

Top Australian official blasts hypocrisy of Assange's possible extradition to U.S.

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FILE PHOTO. Supporters of Julian Assange protest outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London. ©REUTERS / Henry Nicholls?

Sydney, December 14 (RHC)-- If Australia is fine with the extradition of its citizen Julian Assange from Britain to the U.S., it would be equally okay for some nation to hand over an Australian Koran insulter to Saudi Arabia, a senior government official wrote.

The rebuke of the U.S. claim on Assange, authored by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, who also leads the National Party of Australia, stands out. Canberra has distanced itself from the prosecution of the WikiLeaks co-founder.

Assange is currently held at a top security prison in the UK, fighting a legal battle to avoid extradition to the United States, where he is facing an espionage trial that could result in an effective life sentence.

In an article published in the Sydney Morning Herald on Tuesday, Joyce called on people to go beyond the identity of Assange and examine a broader context of the case. What the U.S. seeks appears to be a violation of the basic rights to liberty and habeas corpus of an Australian citizen, he argued.

The US accused Assange of being an accomplice of Chelsie Manning in her theft of confidential files of the US military. Assange is alleged to be criminally guilty because he encouraged Manning to find more material for WikiLeaks to publish and advised her how to avoid being caught. He was on foreign soil when the exchanges took place.

Washington's extradition case is based on its claim that the US government was the injured party in the crimes it alleges – a claim Joyce believes is flimsy. The question is then: why is he to be extradited to the U.S.? If he insulted the Koran, would he be extradited to Saudi Arabia?

Joyce said he personally never met Assange and disliked him from what was reported about him, but insisted it was irrelevant to his position. He said he hoped that the British justice would take the right decision in the case. "They should try him there for any crime he is alleged to have committed on British soil or send him back to Australia, where he is a citizen," the official wrote.

Australia is not seeking to get Assange extradited from the UK and has not publicly offered to take him in to serve a prison term, should he be tried and found guilty by the US. The American government offered assurances that the latter option would be granted as it was convincing the High Court of London to overturn a ruling of a magistrate court.

The earlier ruling refused to extradite Assange to the U.S. due to abysmal prison conditions in the country and concern that the publisher could take his own life, if he were handed over to Washington. Last week the High Court agreed to overturn that decision, reopening the door for an extradition.

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