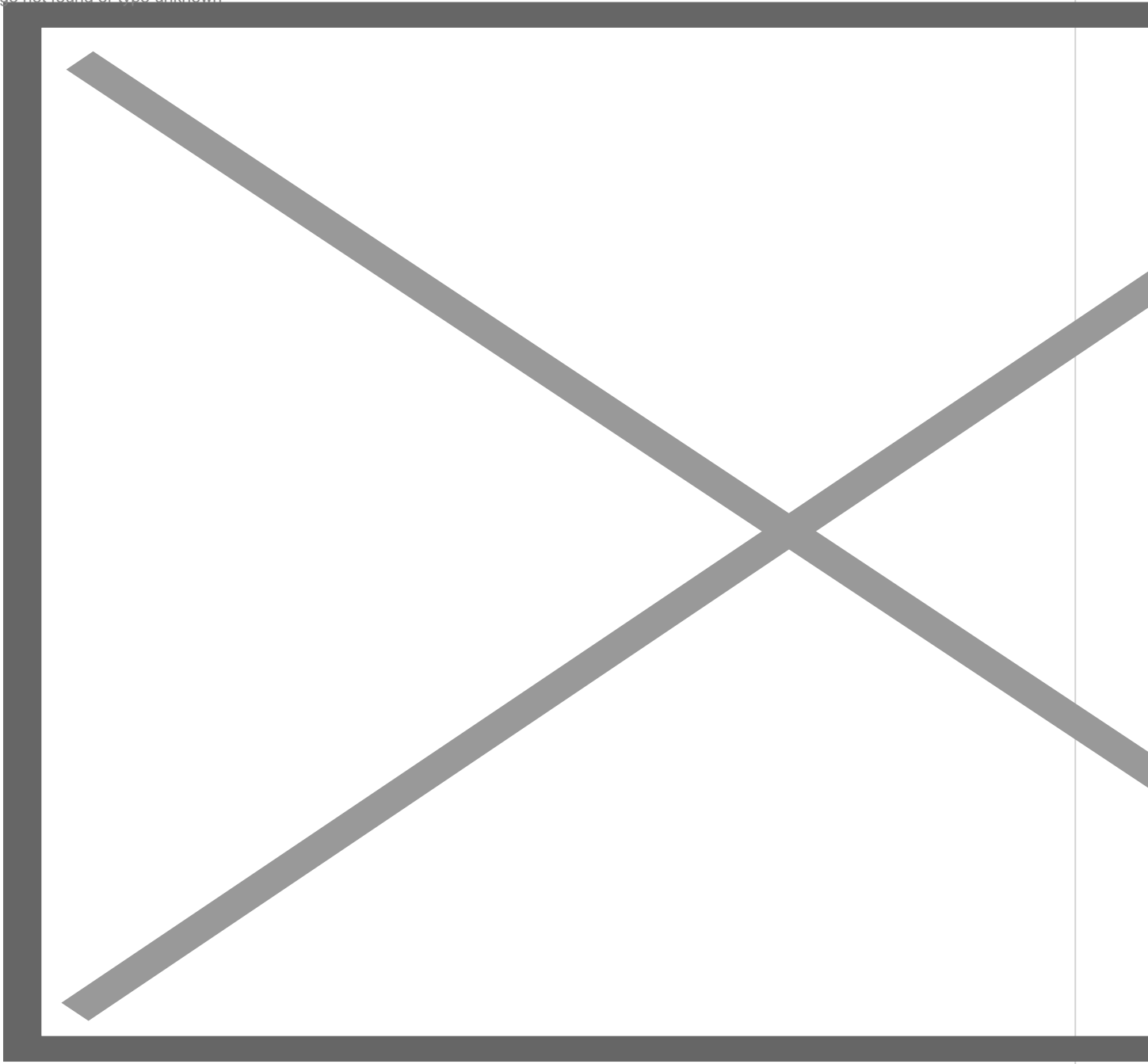


*Julian Assange supporters in
Australian parliament urge U.S.
to get him out of maximum
security prison*

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Independent MP Andrew Wilkie, co-chair of the Bring Julian Assange Home Parliamentary Group, said the WikiLeaks founder was 'not the villain' in his extradition fight. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA Wire

Canberra, July 31 (RHC)-- Julian Assange's supporters in the Australian parliament have implorred the U.S. government to "get him the hell out of a maximum security prison" regardless of diplomatic friction over the WikiLeaks founder's eventual fate.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has pushed back at the Australian government's complaints that the pursuit of Assange had dragged on too long, with Washington's top diplomat declaring that the WikiLeaks founder is alleged to have "risked very serious harm to our national security."

The Australian citizen remains in Belmarsh prison in London as he fights a U.S. attempt to extradite him to face charges in connection with the publication of hundreds of thousands of leaked documents about the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as well as diplomatic cables.

Labor MP Julian Hill, a member of the Bring Julian Assange Home Parliamentary Group, said he had "a fundamentally different view of the substance of the matter than secretary Blinken expressed." "But I appreciate that at least his remarks are candid and direct," Hill told Guardian Australia on Monday.

"In the same vein, I would say back to the United States: at the very least, take Julian Assange's health issues seriously and go into court in the United Kingdom and get him the hell out of a maximum security prison where he's at risk of dying without medical care if he has another stroke."

Hill, who said last week no one would think less of Assange if he struck a plea deal, added that improving the prison conditions "should not be difficult to do even while argument continues about resolution of this matter."

After talks in Brisbane largely focused on military cooperation on Saturday, Blinken confirmed that the Australian government had raised the case with the U.S. on multiple occasions, and said he understood "the concerns and views of Australians."

But Blinken pointedly added that it was "very important that our friends here" in Australia understood US concerns about Assange's "alleged role in one of the largest compromises of classified information in the history of our country".

The independent MP Andrew Wilkie, co-chair of the parliamentary group, said Assange was "not the villain" in the story "and if the US wasn't obsessed with revenge it would drop the extradition charge as soon as possible".

"Antony Blinken's allegation that Julian Assange risked very serious harm to US national security is patent nonsense," Wilkie said. "Mr Blinken would be well aware of the inquiries in both the U.S. and Australia which found that the relevant WikiLeaks disclosures did not result in harm to anyone."

Referring to an incident in Iraq on 12 July 2007 – video footage of which WikiLeaks later released – Wilkie said: "The only deadly behaviour was by U.S. forces ... exposed by WikiLeaks, like the Apache crew who gunned down Iraqi civilians and Reuters journalists."

Liberal MP Bridget Archer, another co-chair of the parliamentary group, acknowledged that the U.S. had its own domestic political concerns, but said Assange had been "incarcerated overseas for a protracted period of time." "He continues to suffer mentally and physically, as does his family, and the government should redouble their efforts to secure his release and return to Australia," Archer said.

On Saturday, the foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, standing next to Blinken, confirmed that the Australian government had "made clear our view that Mr Assange's case has dragged for too long, and our desire that it be brought to a conclusion."

Wong added, however, that there were limits to what could be achieved in talks between governments "until Mr Assange's processes have concluded."

A parliamentarian who supports Assange's release, speaking on condition of anonymity given the sensitivity of the topic, said they believed the original decision to bring the charges against the publisher was political. But they said the Australian government's request to the U.S. government was politically

difficult in the current environment, given that the former president Donald Trump is facing numerous charges and the administration has stressed that the Department of Justice has acted independently.

It is understood that is why some Assange supporters now see him accepting a plea deal as the most achievable way to bring him back to Australia, where he could serve out a suspended sentence.

However, many of his supporters are wary of such a step, arguing he must fight the extradition and should not plead guilty.

Assange's brother, Gabriel Shipton, described Blinken's comments as a "snub" and said the prime minister, Anthony Albanese, must "put Australians' views in front of the president himself" during a forthcoming visit to the United States.

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