

Assange Could Die in Prison, There Is No Time to Lose

By [Dr. David Halpin](#)

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

We write this open letter, as British medical doctors, to express our serious concerns about the physical and mental health of Mr Julian Assange. Our professional concerns follow the shocking eye witness accounts of Craig Murray and John Pilger at the case management hearing that took place on Monday 21 October 2019 at Westminster Magistrates Court. The hearing related to the upcoming February 2020 hearing of the request by the US government for Mr Assange's extradition to the US in relation to his work as a publisher of information, including information about alleged crimes of the US government.

Having entered the Ecuadorian embassy in London in June 2012, he sought and was granted political asylum by the Ecuadorian government. In April 2019, he was removed from the embassy and arrested by the Metropolitan Police. He was subsequently detained in Belmarsh prison, where he is being kept in solitary confinement.

During the seven years spent in the embassy, Mr Assange was visited and examined by numerous experts, each of whom expressed alarm at the state of, and the effects of his confined living conditions on, his health, and requested that he be allowed access to a hospital. No such access was permitted, and Mr Assange was unable to exercise his right to free and necessary expert medical assessment and treatment throughout the seven-year period.

- In late 2015, Mr Assange's doctor reported concerns about his physical condition and requested that he be allowed to receive hospital treatment.
- An Opinion of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention was formally adopted on 4 December 2015, and concluded that Mr Assange was being arbitrarily detained by the Governments of the UK and Sweden. Crucially, it was made clear at the time by the Working Party that any continued arbitrary detention of Mr Assange would constitute torture.
- Three clinicians – Sondra S Crosby, Brock Chisholm and Sean Love – visited Mr Assange from January 2018 onwards. The group examined him for 20 hours over three days in October 2018 and concluded that he was in desperate need of medical care.
- At the beginning of May 2019, Mr Assange was described as suffering from “moderate to severe depression”, and, later that month, he was moved to the medical ward at Belmarsh prison following a significant deterioration in his health. This resulted in Mr Assange being too unwell to appear via video link in court for a preliminary extradition hearing.
- On 31 May 2019, Nils Melzer, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, published a report based on his visit to Belmarsh prison on 9 May 2019 accompanied by two

medical experts, with special expertise in assessing victims of torture. This involved a 60-minute conversation with Mr Assange, an hour-long physical examination and a two-hour psychiatric examination. Mr Melzer reported, “we all came to the conclusion that he showed all the symptoms that are typical for a person that has been exposed to psychological torture over an extended period of time.”

- Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union have published statements expressing their concern over the treatment of Mr Assange and the risks he faces if extradited to the US.
- Craig Murray, a former British Ambassador, published a detailed and shocking eye witness account of Mr Assange’s recent hearing, stating that he exhibited “all the symptoms of a torture victim.” His account was corroborated by the eye witness account of John Pilger, the renowned investigative journalist.

Medical doctors have a professional duty to report suspected torture of which they become aware, wherever it may be occurring. That professional duty is absolute and must be carried out regardless of risk to reporting doctors. We wish to put on record, as medical doctors, our collective serious concerns and to draw the attention of the public and the world to this grave situation.

It is our opinion that Mr Assange requires urgent expert medical assessment of both his physical and psychological state of health. Any medical treatment indicated should be administered in a properly equipped and expertly staffed hospital. Were such urgent assessment and treatment not to take place, we have real concerns, on the evidence currently available, that Mr Assange could die in prison. There is no time to lose.

Below is the response of Rt Hon. Robert Buckland QC MP.

The Rt Hon Mel Stride MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

MP ref: MS43728
MoJ ref: MC077215

27 April 2020

Dear Mel,

THE WELFARE OF MR JULIAN ASSANGE

Thank you for your email of 6 April on behalf of your unnamed constituent, regarding the welfare of Mr Julian Assange, currently remanded in HMP Belmarsh.

As a responsible Government Agency, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) are duty bound to comply with legislation within the Data Protection Laws in a way which protects the personal information of all those who live, work in and visit any of our establishments. It would not be appropriate to offer comment on individual prisoners within HMPPS, and I am, therefore, unable to provide you with a full response to the issues you have raised. Your concerns have, however, been noted and shared with the Governor at HMP Belmarsh.

Naturally I recognise that there will be many families and friends who will be anxious about the welfare of individuals currently detained in the custody of HMPPS and I would like to assure you that we are working very closely with Public Health England to prioritise the safety of all those who live and work in our prisons. Existing, well-developed procedures are in place to manage outbreaks of infectious diseases and prisons are prepared if cases are identified.

The usual regime in prisons has been paused temporarily to apply social distancing. This is vital for keeping prisoners and staff safe and preventing the spread of the virus. This means prisoners can no longer take part in usual recreational activities such as using the gym, going to worship or visiting the library.

In line with the latest Government advice, as of 24 March prisons in England and Wales are temporarily closed to visitors to enable us to ensure the safe and secure functioning of our prisons, while enforcing social distancing. Family and friends can still maintain contact with prisoners while visits are suspended.

There are a number of ways family and friends can keep in contact with someone in prison if they are unable to visit them. For example, they may be able to leave a message using the Prison Voicemail Service: <https://prisonvoicemail.com/> or send them an email using the email a prisoner service <https://www.emailaprisoner.com/>. Alternatively, letters can also be used to maintain contact.

The Prisoners' Families Helpline service's capacity has been bolstered to enable families to raise any general questions about contact with families during this time through this route. Additionally up to date information is available through the Government website: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-and-prisons>.

The issue of Mr Assange's remand into custody is a matter for the courts, not HMPPS, and it would not be appropriate for me to offer comment on the guilt or sentencing of any prisoner. The same principle applies to the possible extradition of any prisoner to another country, as this decision is not within my control: extradition is also ultimately a matter for the courts. However, I can assure you that extradition requests bear no relevance to the conditions in which a prisoner is kept whilst located within HMPPS. All prisoners have the same rights to a decent, safe and healthy regime.

I am sure that you will be aware of the Government's recent announcement that risk assessed prisoners who are within two months of their release date will be temporarily released from prison, as part of the national plan to protect the NHS and save lives. As someone who has been remanded into prison custody pending an extradition hearing, Mr Assange does not meet the criteria to be considered for this initiative. It has been widely reported that Mr Assange had a bail hearing on 25 March to consider his release into the community, which concluded that his previous behaviours deemed him as high risk of absconding. Bail was denied by the court.

I hope that this response alleviates your constituent's concerns. I am sorry that I am unable to comment specifically on Mr Assange but I hope you understand the need to protect prisoners' personal information.

Yours ever



RT HON ROBERT BUCKLAND QC MP

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