

Lawyer Protests Brutal Treatment Of Bradley Manning

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The lawyer representing Army Private Bradley Manning, who is accused of turning over classified military and diplomatic documents to WikiLeaks, has demanded a mitigation of the harsh conditions under which he is being held at a military prison or his outright release from custody.

Lawyer David E. Coombs on January 5 requested Manning's release based on a section of the US military's court martial code. The filing came after authorities at the Quantico prison in Virginia refused to consider separate requests filed earlier in the month from Coombs and Manning requesting that his imprisonment status be alleviated. The military justifies severe incarceration for Manning based on the absurd allegation that he is a threat to national security and the unsubstantiated claim that he might harm himself.

Coombs also filed a demand for a speedy trial on January 9. The lawyer's web site notes that Manning has been held in solitary confinement since May 29 of last year without formal charges being made against him. According to the court martial code, charges would be leveled in an "Article 32" hearing, the military equivalent of a grand jury investigation. The hearing would precede the trial, a general court martial. If convicted on all counts against him, Manning, 23, could face 52 years in prison.

Manning, whose only "crime" is revealing to the world the bloody crimes of US imperialism, has been held in appalling conditions for nearly eight months. For 23 hours a day he is confined to a six-foot by twelve-foot jail cell. He has no daily face-to-face contact with anyone besides prison guards, is not allowed to exercise, is forbidden to sleep clothed, and is denied even a pillow and sheets.

The conditions under which Manning is held are in sharp contrast to those the Army affords to the dozen soldiers from the Stryker Brigade charged with killing Afghan civilians, cutting off body parts as trophies, or covering up those atrocities. These soldiers also face Article 32 hearings, but none is held in solitary confinement and the majority are merely confined to base, not jailed.

A friend of Manning's who was able to visit him at Quantico, David M. House, reports that Manning is suffering "a remarkable decline in his psychological state and his physical well-being." The organization Psychologists for Social Responsibility has recently sent an open letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates warning that Manning is likely to suffer "irreversible physiological changes in brain functioning from the trauma of solitary confinement."

A United Nations special rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Mendez, has submitted a formal inquiry to the State Department on the case.

One purpose of this dehumanizing treatment is to make an example of Manning to anyone else who would dare to reveal the crimes of US imperialism. As a recent Los Angeles Times editorial acknowledges, “the conditions under which he is being held...are so harsh as to suggest he is being punished for conduct of which he hasn’t been convicted.”

The Times, one of a handful of media outlets raising concerns over what constitutes a high-profile case of torture, points to another motive for the abuse of the prisoner. “Some speculate that by treating Manning harshly, officials hope to induce him to implicate WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange,” it notes. In other words, the military is trying to force Manning to provide perjured testimony against Assange.

For Assange to be prosecuted under the reactionary World War I-era Espionage Act, it would be necessary to prove that he was actively involved in the theft of secret documents. With WikiLeaks organized in such a way that it is impossible for those who post leaked materials, like Assange, to know the identity of those who submit them, like Manning, this connection could be established only if Manning claims that Assange somehow recruited him or assisted him in obtaining the documents.

The effort to pit Manning against Assange was taken up Friday by the New York Times, which has led the media charge against WikiLeaks. In an article by Scott Shane provocatively entitled “WikiLeaks Founder on Estate; Accused Soldier Waits in Brig,” the Times suggests that Assange is living the high life near London on “a 600-acre estate where he has negotiated \$1.7 million in book deals.”

Assange is, in fact, under house arrest, something that is not even mentioned in the Times article. He did not choose to spend his time, wearing an electronic tether, at the estate, but was ordered there by the court pending a decision on Sweden’s attempt to extradite him on phony rape charges. He has been the subject of an international campaign of vilification—including threats made against his life by prominent US political and media figures.

WikiLeaks has publicly supported Manning’s legal defense and donated more than \$100,000 to his defense fund. Assange has called him “the world’s pre-eminent prisoner of conscience,” while at the same time warning that the Obama administration aims at “cracking Bradley Manning” to confess “that he somehow conspired with me to harm the security of the United States.”

The Times article is thoroughly scurrilous, dishonest and cynical. It is but the latest effort by this organ of American liberalism to carry out character assassination against Assange. It underscores how deeply the newspaper is involved in the efforts of the US state to silence Assange, destroy WikiLeaks and prevent others from exposing the conspiracies and crimes of American imperialism.

The persecution of Manning and Assange is of grave significance. Bound up with their fate are basic democratic rights that the ruling class finds incompatible with its aims, among them freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and the right to a fair trial.

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