

Australian MPs in cross-party support for Assange's release



Canberra, October 23 (RHC)-- As Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese prepares to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden somewhere in his briefing notes will be the name Julian Assange. An Australian citizen and founder of WikiLeaks, Assange is currently awaiting extradition from a British prison to the United States to face espionage charges.

Before he was elected prime minister, Albanese, had been fighting to have Assange released. He has publicly said on several occasions that the Assange case has gone on for too long. But now that he is prime minister, he has been walking a fine line when it comes to the Assange case, not wanting to upset the Canberra-Washington relationship.

Recently a parliamentary delegation from across the political divide in Australia visited Washington to put forward the case for the release of Assange. For the past four years, Assange has been detained at Belmarsh maximum security prison near London which has often been described as the United Kingdom's Guantanamo, a reference to the United States' base and prison in Cuba.

Many lawmakers in the US want Assange to stand trial for espionage but it goes deeper than that. The US wants to make an example of Assange for exposing, what some would say, war crimes by the US military in Iraq and elsewhere.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva told the United Nations General Assembly, on September 19th, that it is "essential" to preserve the freedom of the press and that WikiLeaks' founder Assange should not be prosecuted for informing the public. "A journalist like Julian Assange cannot be punished for informing society in a transparent and legitimate way," Lula said. His comments came a day before the Australian cross-party delegation arrived in Washington.

The group brought a letter, signed by more than 60 members of the Australian parliament, calling on the US to drop the charges against Assange who faces up to 175 years in an American maximum-security prison if found guilty.

Greens Senator David Shoebridge, who was part of the delegation, said: "There was a strong level of support and energy in all of our meetings with U.S. lawmakers. "Many of those we met were extremely moved by the level of commitment from Australia about (Assange's) case."

He told China Daily the cross-party delegation was an "extremely powerful display" of the consensus in the Australian parliament about the need for Assange to be released. "It's extremely rare for matters to be advocated across political lines in the US, so the diversity of the delegation really cut through," Shoebridge said.

Liberal Party MP Bridget Archer, one of the co-convenors of the 'Bring Julian Assange Home' parliamentary group, told China Daily "there is certainly strength for the case to bring (Assange) home".

"This is evidenced by the multi-partisan membership of the Parliamentary Friends group and the sentiments shared by both the prime minister and opposition leader that enough is enough," Archer said.

"His case can no longer be ignored, and I am hopeful that we are getting closer to a just decision by the US government," she said.

The letter which the Australian delegation took to the US said, in part: "Let there be no doubt that if Julian Assange is removed from the United Kingdom to the United States there will a sharp and sustained outcry in Australia."

The letter also applauds the U.S. academics, civil society groups, human rights advocates, journalists, and lawmakers who have demanded freedom for the 52-year-old. "We believe the right and best course of action would be for the United States' Department of Justice to cease its pursuit and prosecution of Julian Assange," the letter noted.

"Alternatively, a decision to simply abandon the extradition proceedings would have the sensible, just, and compassionate effect of allowing Mr Assange to go free from a prolonged and harsh period of high-security detention. It is well and truly time for this matter to end, and for Julian Assange to return home."

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