

Supporters of press freedom around the world celebrate release of Julian Assange

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June 24: Julian Assange, looking out the window of the plane that takes him out of British territory. Finally!!

WikiLeaks founder's supporters welcome likely end of his 14-year legal ordeal, but say he should never have been imprisoned in the first place.

Havana, June 25 (RHC)-- Activists, politicians and journalists around the world have welcomed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's expected return home to Australia, following a deal with prosecutors in the

United States in which he agreed to plead guilty to a single count of violating the country's espionage law.

Assange, who will turn 53-years-old next week -- on July 3rd -- was released on Monday from prison in the United Kingdom, where he was being held as he fought extradition to the United States. He boarded a plane at Stansted airport north of London and left Britain.

Assange is scheduled to appear at a court in Saipan, a U.S. Pacific territory at 9 a.m. on Wednesday (23:00 GMT on Tuesday), where he will be sentenced to 62 months of time already served. This means he would be immediately free to walk away and return to his native Australia.

Supporters of the WikiLeaks founder welcomed the expected end to Assange's nearly 14-year legal drama, with some hailing him as "a hero for the ages" and others noting he should never have been imprisoned in the first place.

Julian Assange, who spent seven years holed up in Ecuador's London Embassy from 2012 to 2019 to avoid extradition to Sweden on separate charges of sexual assault (which were dropped due to lack of evidence), was indicted by the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump in 2019 over WikiLeaks' mass release of secret U.S. documents. These included diplomatic cables and battlefield accounts such as a 2007 video of a U.S. Apache helicopter firing at crowds in Iraq, killing a dozen people including two staff from the Reuters news agency.

The charges against Assange prompted outrage among his many global supporters who have long argued that as the publisher of WikiLeaks, he should not face charges typically used against government employees who steal or leak information.

"If Julian had been extradited to the U.S. and prosecuted under the Espionage Act [...] it would have had serious implications for journalists globally who seek information in the public interest, classified documents, and who then publish them in the public interest," she said from New York. "Remember, of course that Julian is not a U.S. citizen. He is an Australian citizen and if he had been brought to the U.S. and had he been prosecuted, that could have meant that journalists anywhere seeking to publish information about human rights abuses, as WikiLeaks did, could have found themselves pursued and prosecuted as the U.S. had done with Julian."

Ginsberg added that the plea deal was a way for the Biden administration to save face, amid the increased pressure to release Assange, especially from the Australian government.

"They [the Biden administration] have a guilty plea on a criminal charge, but only on one criminal charge of course, and not the 18 that he was being prosecuted for and that could have seen him face 175 years in total in jail. And Julian has been released to his home country and will now be able to spend time with his family and with his loved ones."

The Australian government had no immediate comment, but a spokesperson said Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has been clear that Assange's case has "dragged on for too long" and that there was "nothing to be gained by his continued incarceration."

Australian politicians who fought for Assange's freedom also welcomed the news.

Barnaby Joyce, a former deputy prime minister, told ABC that it was greatly encouraging to see Assange on a plane, but cautioned that the "finish line" was not yet reached. The National Party legislator added that he was "pleased" that the outcome would set "an incredibly strong precedent" that Australians should not be charged by other countries for alleged crimes that are not committed on their soil.

"[Extraterritoriality] is a principle, and if you let it lapse for one then it lapses for all," he was quoted as saying.

Australian Greens Senator David Shoebridge said he was looking forward to welcoming Assange home. "Let's be clear, Julian Assange should never have been charged with espionage in the first place or had to make this deal," Shoebridge said. "[He] has spent years in jail for the crime of showing the world the horrors of the US war in Iraq and the complicity of governments like Australia and that is why he has been punished."

The president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, was one of the first world leaders to welcome the news, saying Assange's "imprisonment and torture was an attack on global press freedom." Petro invited Assange and his wife, Stella, to visit Colombia and added on X: "Denouncing the massacre of civilians in Iraq by the US war machine was his crime, and now the massacre is being repeated in Gaza."

Evo Morales, the former president of Bolivia, said Assange's release marked a "day of joy for the fight for peace and truth." "We are very happy about Julian Assange's freedom," he wrote on X. "He was imprisoned for many years for exposing to the world the crimes of the U.S. He helped reveal and dismantle the lies that justify wars and invasions."

In the United States, Cornel West, an independent candidate running for the presidency in this year's election, celebrated the news and said Assange must be pardoned immediately. "We struggled, fought, and prayed for many years for this wonderful moment! He also should be pardoned immediately because he committed no crime. He simply exposed the barbaric crimes of the American empire!" West wrote on X.

Robert F Kennedy Jr, another candidate in the US presidential election, said he was "overjoyed" and hailed Assange as "a generational hero." "The bad news is that he had to plead guilty to conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defense info. Which means the U.S. security state succeeded in criminalizing journalism and extending their jurisdiction globally to non-citizens," Kennedy wrote on X. "Julian had to take this. He has heart problems and he would have died in prison. But the security state has imposed a horrifying precedent and dealt a big blow to freedom of the press."

Tulsi Gabbard, a former U.S. legislator, wrote on X, "This should never have happened, but finally, Julian Assange is free."

Glenn Greenwald, an American journalist and founder of The Intercept news website, said it was an "outrage" that Assange was detained for almost 15 years and was forced to plead guilty despite committing no crime. "But on a human and personal level, it's beautiful to watch him leave prison a free man, and finally leave the UK."

Aaron Mate, a journalist at The Grayzone news, said Assange's freedom is a "rare victory for humanity." "More than anyone else on this planet, Julian Assange exposed state crimes and the deception wielded to conceal them from the public. His persecution and torture exposed the threat that state power sees in an informed citizenry," Mate wrote on X.

British author and journalist Matt Kennard also took to X to describe Assange as a "hero for the ages" and said that "what he endured for all of us is unimaginable".

Prominent U.S. lawyer Steven Donziger said Assange was a "courageous journalist" and that his release was "an extraordinary example of how people power can free the persecuted and shape global events".

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