

Australian leaders welcome expected homecoming of Julian Assange

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A screengrab from WikiLeaks' X account showing Julian Assange arriving in Bangkok © WikiLeaks/PA

Canberra, June 26 (RHC)-- Australian leaders welcome an expected plea deal for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange that will put an end to his 12-year battle against extradition to the United States and bring him back home.

According to U.S. legal documents, the Australian journalist struck an agreement for his freedom by pleading guilty to a single count of revealing classified U.S. national defense documents.

The deal will end Washington's pursuit of Assange in connection with the publication of 700,000 confidential documents related to U.S. military and diplomatic activities, starting in 2010.

The Australian journalist is due to be sentenced at a hearing on the island of Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands in the Pacific on Wednesday.

Assange was released from a British prison on Monday and he is now being accompanied by Australia's high commissioner to Britain, Stephen Smith, as he flies to a U.S. territory in the Pacific to formalize a plea deal.

Speaking in parliament, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said "regardless of the views that people have about Mr. Assange's activities, the case has dragged on for too long. There is nothing to be gained by his continued incarceration and we want him brought home to Australia."

Albanese confirmed the high-level consular support for Assange, saying that Australia's ambassador to the U.S., Kevin Rudd, was "also providing important assistance" to Assange.

The prime minister said he "will have more to say when these legal proceedings have concluded, which I hope will be very soon."

Under the plea deal, Assange is expected to be sentenced to 62 months in prison, with credit for the five years and two months he has served in prison in Britain. That would allow a return to Australia.

Julian Assange had been detained in London's high-security Belmarsh prison since April 2019.

The journalist was forcibly removed by British police after spending seven years holed up in Ecuador's London embassy to avoid extradition.

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