

WikiLeaks Founder Assange Seeks Asylum in Ecuador

WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London on June 19, 2012 to request asylum, refusing to leave until his request was processed.

According to *The New York Times* on June 20, British police said Assange — who had been under house arrest since December 2010 while fighting extradition to Sweden to face accusations of sexual abuse — violated his bail by not returning to his home in London between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m., making him subject to arrest if he were to leave the embassy premises. On June 14, the British Supreme Court rejected Assange's final appeal, ruling that unless the European Court of Human Rights agreed to hear a further appeal, Assange should be extradited to Sweden by midnight on July 7, the *Times* reported.

Assange is accused of raping one woman and sexually molesting and coercing another in Stockholm in August 2010 while visiting to give a lecture. He has denied the accusations and claims that if he is extradited to Sweden, he could more easily be transferred to the United States to face charges related to the publication of thousands of classified diplomatic and military documents. U.S. Army Pvt. Bradley Manning is currently facing charges for leaking those documents to WikiLeaks. News media have reported that a grand jury has been convened to investigate the possibility of charging Assange or WikiLeaks for the leaks. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on Feb. 29, 2012 that a confidential email obtained from the private U.S. intelligence company Stratfor stated that U.S. prosecutors have a sealed indictment against Assange. (For more on the Manning case, see "Leaks: New Policies Emerge, Congress Gets Involved" on page 11 of this issue of the *Silha Bulletin*. For more on the possible Assange indictment, see "The Obama Administration Takes on Government Leakers; Transparency May be a Casualty" in the Winter/Spring 2012 issue.)

Ecuador offered Assange residency in November 2010, as controversy ramped up following the publication of the American military and diplomatic documents, according to a June 21, 2012 story in *The Telegraph* of London. *The Telegraph* story added, "It has been reported the country became the only one to officially expel a US ambassador in the wake of the furore caused by the leaks. It has been speculated that Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa may offer Mr. Assange asylum to try to redeem his record on free speech." The diplomatic cables implicated Correa in corruption and were denounced as completely untrue in state-run Ecuadorian media. In February 2012, Correa successfully

championed a criminal libel conviction against *El Universo*, Ecuador's second best-selling newspaper, including fines that are likely to force the paper into bankruptcy. (For more on the libel case, see "International Journalists Face Censorship in Confronting Governments" in the Winter/Spring 2012 *Silha Bulletin*.)

CNN reported July 10 that Correa told a local television station that the United States allows capital punishment for a "political crime," a fact that could provide sufficient grounds to grant asylum. "We have to see whether everything that's being done in the case of Julian Assange is compatible with ... the constitution and our view of human rights, political rights and due process," Correa said. On June 26, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Ecuador Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino said a decision on the asylum request would not be announced until after the conclusion of the Olympic Games on August 12. *The Guardian* reported July 26 that officials at the Ecuadorean embassy had asked for assurances from the U.K. and Sweden that Assange would not be sent to the United States.

On July 24, Reuters reported that Assange had hired Baltasar Garzon, a well-known international human rights lawyer, as his attorney and legal adviser. Patino said he welcomed Garzon's involvement in the Assange case because the lawyer had "a very good relationship" with the Ecuadorian government. (Former Assange lawyer Mark Stephens discussed the Assange case in the 2011 Silha Lecture. See "Silha Lecture Highlights Free Speech in the Digital Age" in the Fall 2011 *Silha Bulletin* for more on that event.)

– Patrick File
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