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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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23.02.2020

## Assange's US Extradition Hearing Opens Monday:

### The Fight for the Free Press Is Now On

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's US extradition hearing opens Monday. Finally, his legal team can argue in a court over the offenses listed in the indictment against the journalist who published government documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The prosecution of Assange threatens press freedom. This is the first time that the US Espionage Act has been used against a publisher. Ahead of the proceedings in a UK court, professionals, activists and human rights defenders around the world are coming together to intervene in this highly politicized case.

On Tuesday, a group of doctors representing 117 physicians and psychologists from 18 nations [penned](#) an open letter in the Lancet medical journal, appealing to governments to end the torture of Mr. Assange, and provide the best available healthcare before it is too late.

The Doctors for Assange group [asserted](#):

*Should Assange die in a UK prison, as the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has warned, he will effectively have been tortured to death. Much of that torture will have taken place in a prison medical ward, on doctors' watch. The medical profession cannot afford to stand silently by, on the wrong side of torture and the wrong side of history, while such a travesty unfolds.*

International human rights and free speech organizations like [Amnesty International](#) and [Reporters without Borders](#) (RSF) came out as strongly opposing Assange's extradition to the United States, where he would face 175 years in prison. Both have now launched petitions against the extradition.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović also [issued](#) a warning, demanding that "Julian Assange should not be extradited due to potential impact on press freedom and concerns about ill-treatment."

On Thursday, journalists worldwide came together in support of Assange's freedom. A joint statement [released](#) by 1200 colleagues from 9 countries called for the immediate release of Assange and criticized the US government's move toward criminalization of journalism:

*All journalists use information from confidential sources so the legal actions are an extremely dangerous precedent that threatens the world's journalists and news media. The*

*signatories believe Assange's imprisonment and the court proceedings are a gross miscarriage of Justice.*

They also [wrote](#): "We urge our fellow journalists to inform the public accurately about this abuse of fundamental rights. We urge all journalists to speak up in defense of Julian Assange at this critical time. Dangerous times call for fearless journalism."

The signatories included staff from most of the world's major media organizations, including many award-winning and prominent journalists. One of the signatories, John Pilger, a renowned journalist and a long time supporter of Assange and friend, [emphasized](#) once again that Assange should "be freed, not betrayed." He made it clear that "when Julian Assange steps into Woolwich Crown Court on Feb. 24, true journalism will be the only crime on trial." As the countdown to a trial on journalism begins, the fight for free press is now on. In anticipation of Monday's hearing, a powerful light [was shone](#) by protesters projecting footage of the US military airstrike on Iraq civilians onto the British Parliament building. It reminded all, of the reason why Assange sits in a maximum high security prison.

On the weekend before the hearing, protests against extradition [are planned](#) across the world. On Saturday, supporters [will march](#) from Australia House to Parliament Square in London. From medical professionals to journalists' associations, the waves of courage that have emerged this week in defense of Julian Assange, invite all of us to join in, and stand on the right side of history.

*Nozomi Hayase, Ph.D., is a writer who has been covering issues of freedom of speech, transparency, and decentralized movements. Her work is featured in many publications. Find her on twitter [@nozomimagine](#).*

Posted on [February 22, 2020](#)[February 21, 2020](#)