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AFP

Assange vows WikiLeaks to stay strong despite new blow

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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said the site will stay strong despite another blow to its funding and the publication Sunday of new details of the sex crime allegations against him.

The Australian began his third full day under "mansion arrest" at a friend's house while he fights extradition to Sweden, vowing that the whistleblowing website would continue to publish more secret US diplomatic cables.

Assange on Saturday denounced Bank of America, the largest US bank, for becoming the latest institution to halt financial transactions for Wikileaks after MasterCard, PayPal, Visa Europe and others.

The bank said its decision was "based upon our reasonable belief that WikiLeaks may be engaged in activities that are, among other things, inconsistent with our internal policies for processing payments."

"It's a new type of business McCarthyism in the US to deprive this organisation of the funds that it needs to survive, to deprive me personally of the funds that my lawyers need to protect me against extradition to the US or to Sweden," Assange told AFP.

The term was coined to describe the anti-communist pursuits of former US senator Joseph McCarthy from the late 1940s to the 1950s.

Assange is staying at Ellingham Hall, the mansion in eastern England of journalist friend Vaughan Smith, as part of the conditions of bail, which he was granted by London's High Court on Thursday.

He must also report daily to a nearby police station and wear an electronic tag.

Several newspapers published lurid new details of the allegations of sexual assault against two women, over which Swedish prosecutors want to question him. The 39-year-old denies the charges.

The Guardian newspaper -- which has cooperated with WikiLeaks on the publication of the US documents -- and the Mail on Sunday both reported that the two women with whom he had sex in Sweden had gone to police after he refused to take an HIV test.

Assange hit out at Swedish handling of the case, accusing authorities there of leaking fresh details about the case that even he and his defence lawyers have not had access to.

The former computer hacker also reiterated that there were threats against his life and those of the website's staff, but he vowed that WikiLeaks would continue publishing the cables.

"We are a robust organisation. During my time in solitary confinement we continued to publish every day and its not going to change," he said.

Assange claimed earlier in an interview with Forbes magazine that a "megaleak" by the website will target a major US bank "early next year".

WikiLeaks has enraged Washington with its release of thousands of leaked US diplomatic cables and confidential military documents relating to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Assange said Friday it looked "increasingly likely" the US would try to extradite him on charges related to the leaked cables as he savoured his first day on bail.

He said his lawyers believed a secret US grand jury investigation had been started into his role in the release.

Media reports suggest that US prosecutors are trying to build a case against Assange on the grounds that he encouraged a US soldier, Bradley Manning, to steal US cables from a government computer and pass them to WikiLeaks.

A report by congressional researchers said the Espionage Act and other US laws could be used to prosecute Assange, but there is no known precedent for prosecuting publishers in such a case.

The latest US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks indicated that the United Nations offered Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe a retirement package and safe haven overseas if he agreed to stand down.

The offer was made by Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general at the time in 2000, said the memo, which was drawn up by US officials and cited the then-opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).