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## UN expert says "collective persecution" of Julian Assange must end now

GENEVA (31 May 2019) - A UN expert who visited Julian Assange in a London prison says he fears his human rights could be seriously violated if he is extradited to the United States and condemned the deliberate and concerted abuse inflicted for years on the Wikileaks co-founder.

"My most urgent concern is that, in the United States, Mr. Assange would be exposed to a real risk of serious violations of his human rights, including his freedom of expression, his right to a fair trial and the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment," said Nils Melzer, the UN Special Rapporteur on torture.

"I am particularly alarmed at the recent announcement by the US Department of Justice of 17 new charges against Mr. Assange under the Espionage Act, which currently carry up to 175 years in prison. This may well result in a life sentence without parole, or possibly even the death penalty, if further charges were to be added in the future," said Melzer, who was also following up on earlier concerns for Assange's health.

Although Assange is not held in solitary confinement, the Special Rapporteur said he is gravely concerned that the limited frequency and duration of lawyers' visits and his lack of access to case files and documents make it impossible for him to adequately prepare his defence in any of the complex legal proceedings piling up against him.

"Since 2010, when Wikileaks started publishing evidence of war crimes and torture committed by US forces, we have seen a sustained and concerted effort by several States towards getting Mr. Assange extradited to the United States for prosecution, raising serious concern over the criminalisation of investigative journalism in violation of both the US Constitution and international human rights law," Melzer said.

"Since then, there has been a relentless and unrestrained campaign of public mobbing, intimidation and defamation against Mr. Assange, not only in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom, Sweden and, more recently, Ecuador." According to the expert, this included an endless stream of humiliating, debasing and threatening statements in the press and on social media, but also by senior political figures, and even by judicial magistrates involved in proceedings against Assange.

"In the course of the past nine years, Mr. Assange has been exposed to persistent, progressively severe abuse ranging from systematic judicial persecution and arbitrary confinement in the Ecuadorian embassy, to his oppressive isolation, harassment and surveillance inside the embassy, and from deliberate collective ridicule, insults and humiliation, to open instigation of violence and even repeated calls for his assassination."

Melzer was accompanied during his prison visit on 9 May by two medical experts specialised in examining potential victims of torture and other ill-treatment.

The team were able to speak with Assange in confidence and to conduct a thorough medical assessment.

"It was obvious that Mr. Assange's health has been seriously affected by the extremely hostile and arbitrary environment he has been exposed to for many years," the expert said. "Most importantly, in

addition to physical ailments, Mr. Assange showed all symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture, including extreme stress, chronic anxiety and intense psychological trauma.

"The evidence is overwhelming and clear," the expert said. "Mr. Assange has been deliberately exposed, for a period of several years, to progressively severe forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the cumulative effects of which can only be described as psychological torture.

"I condemn, in the strongest terms, the deliberate, concerted and sustained nature of the abuse inflicted on Mr. Assange and seriously deplore the consistent failure of all involved governments to take measures for the protection of his most fundamental human rights and dignity," the expert said. "By displaying an attitude of complacency at best, and of complicity at worst, these governments have created an atmosphere of impunity encouraging Mr. Assange's uninhibited vilification and abuse."

In official letters sent earlier this week, Melzer urged the four involved governments to refrain from further disseminating, instigating or tolerating statements or other activities prejudicial to Assange's human rights and dignity and to take measures to provide him with appropriate redress and rehabilitation for past harm. He further appealed to the British Government not to extradite Assange to the United States or to any other State failing to provide reliable guarantees against his onward transfer to the United States. He also reminded the United Kingdom of its obligation to ensure Assange's unimpeded access to legal counsel, documentation and adequate preparation commensurate with the complexity of the pending proceedings.

"In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political persecution I have never seen a group of democratic States ganging up to deliberately isolate, demonise and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law," Melzer said. "The collective persecution of Julian Assange must end here and now!"

ENDS

**Mr Nils Melzer**, *Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*; is part of what is known as the *Special Procedures* of the Human Rights Council. *Special Procedures*, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. *Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.*

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