

International

Assange arrested in London after Ecuador pulls asylum

Snowden calls Assange's arrest 'dark moment for press freedom'

LONDON: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's nearly seven-year hideout in Ecuador's London embassy abruptly ended yesterday when police entered the building and arrested him ahead of possible extradition to the United States. Footage shot by the Russian video news agency Ruptly showed a frantic-looking Assange—his worn face framed by a large white beard and shock of grey hair—being huddled out of the building by plainclothes security officers and pulled into a waiting police van.

A Ruptly reporter who shot the scene and requested anonymity told AFP that Assange shouted "UK must resist" as he was being dragged into the van. Assange has been living at the embassy in London's plush Knightsbridge district since 2012 when he sought refuge there after being accused of sexual assault in Sweden—allegations that have since been dropped.

A British police statement said Assange was then "further arrested on behalf of the United States authorities, at 10:53 hrs after his arrival at a central London police station. "This is an extradition warrant under Section 73 of the Extradition Act." WikiLeaks accused Ecuador of breaching international law by withdrawing his asylum. "Ecuador has illegally terminated Assange political asylum in violation of international law," the whistleblowing website said on Twitter.

US extradition risk

Assange is wanted by Britain for violating prior

bail conditions—a minor charge that WikiLeaks fears will be used as a pretext for extraditing him to the United States. There he potentially faces a far more serious case linked to the publication of classified US defense material. Britain's Europe and Americas minister Alan Duncan said London was "very grateful to the government of Ecuador under president (Lenin) Moreno for the action they have taken".

Moreno himself said that he had "asked Great Britain for the guarantee that Mr Assange will not be extradited to any country in which he could suffer torture or face the death penalty". "The British government has confirmed this in writing," he said in a video message. The United States applies the death penalty in both federal and state courts. Treason charges are punishable by death in times of war—but Washington has refused to confirm reports that it had indicted Assange on unspecified charges. Ecuador's former leader Rafael Correa called Moreno "the greatest traitor in Ecuadorian and Latin American history", who has committed "a crime that humanity will never forget".

Dark moment for freedom

Assange's case has opened up explosive debate about security and free speech. His supporters view him as a crusader who fearlessly exposes injustices such as torture and alleged war crimes committed by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 47-year-old Australian's critics accuse him of cosying up to authoritarian leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and putting Americans'



LONDON: In this file photo Wikileaks founder Julian Assange speaks on the balcony of the Embassy of Ecuador in London. — AFP

lives at risk. Fugitive former US government contractor Edward Snowden—himself wanted for leaking details of secret US surveillance programs—called Assange's arrest a "dark moment for press freedom".

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused Britain of "strangling freedom". Assange's mother Christine tweeted that she had been advised that her son faces up to 12 months in

a British prison. "Our focus is as always to STOP a US Extradition!" she wrote. Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson also raised the possibility of her client being sent to face US justice. "Just confirmed: #Assange has been arrested not just for breach of bail conditions but also in relation to a US extradition request," Robinson tweeted. Assange is due to appear in a London court later Thursday and Australia has requested consular access. —AFP

Russian MPs approve controversial bill restricting internet

MOSCOW: Russian lawmakers yesterday approved a bill that would allow Moscow to cut the country's internet traffic from foreign servers, in a key second reading paving the way for legislation that activists fear is a step towards online isolation. Critics call the bill a form of "digital slavery," that threatens censorship and possibly a sealed network similar to that in North Korea. It is set to take effect on November 1 once it formally becomes law.

The proposed measures would create technology to monitor internet routing and steer Russian internet traffic away from foreign servers, ostensibly to prevent a foreign country from shutting it down. Lawmakers in the State Duma, parliament's lower house, voted 320 to 15 to pass the bill. Authors of the initiative say Russia must ensure the security of its networks after US President Donald Trump unveiled a new American cybersecurity strategy last year that said Russia had carried out cyber attacks with impunity.

The legislation has been dubbed the "sovereign internet" bill by Russian media. Critics say implementing the measures would be expensive and give vast censorship powers to the government's new traffic monitoring centre. Thousands of people rallied last month against this and other bills that critics say aim at restricting information and communication online. Last month President Vladimir Putin signed controversial laws that allow courts to fine and briefly jail people for showing disrespect to-

wards authorities, and block media for publishing "fake news".

Web censorship

"It's a bill on digital slavery and the introduction of censorship for the web," said Sergei Ivanov, a member of the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party. "I've never seen such a blatant and cynical bill which is being pushed through like this amid claims that not a penny will be spent from the budget," he added. Russian business news website RBK reported in March that implementing the measures would cost an estimated 30 billion rubles.

The bill's authors insist that the measures only outline a plan to make Russian internet "more secure and reliable". "The bill's popular name—'The Chinese Firewall'—has nothing to do with our initiative," said Leonid Levin, a lawmaker from the ruling United Russia party which dominates Russian parliament. Levin said that ahead of the second reading lawmakers had looked through 58 proposed amendments and that the legislation included comments from critics and industry experts. "Significant work had been done," he added.

Internet activist Artyom Kozlyuk said however the amended text was even more vague than the previous version and "did not change for the better." Kozlyuk, who coordinates the Roscomsvoboda anti-censorship organization, added the bill had been sailing through parliament "very quickly" despite pleas from the public and the communications industry to pause and have a proper discussion. While it would be technically difficult to completely cut off Russia from the world wide web, if the bill passes, "it will create serious economic risks for the industry and for the country," Kozlyuk added. The bill is set to take effect after a third reading in the State Duma and a vote in the upper house, both of which are seen as a formality. Then the bill would be formally signed into law by Putin. The Kremlin insisted it has no desire to isolate Russian internet users. "No one is suggesting cutting the internet," spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said, adding that the protesters suffered from "delusions." —AFP

Macron signs French 'anti-rioters' bill

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron has signed into law legislation giving security forces greater powers at demonstrations that opponents claim violates civil liberties, the official journal said yesterday. The bill, which was approved by lawmakers in February, aims to crack down on violence that has marred the "yellow vest" protest movement, which has rocked France since erupting in November. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner on yesterday hailed the law as a "text which protects the French in the face of insecurity and violence".

"It's a text that protects our institutions and our liberties," he wrote on Twitter. But in a move indicative of the political trouble caused for Macron by the "yellow vest" movement, France's Constitutional Council, its highest constitutional authority, refused this month to give its green light to one of the most contentious parts of the legislation. It would have given the authorities the power to ban from demonstrations any individual "posing a particularly serious threat to public order".

That article was accompanied by a file of named of people wanted by the police, which critics strongly denounced as violating citizens' freedom of assembly as protected in the constitution. But the council did approve two other key parts of the legislation, including giving the authorities the power to search bags and cars in and around demonstrations at the demand of a prosecutor. It also approved making it a criminal offence to conceal the face at a demonstration, punishable by a year in prison and 15,000 euros in fines. —AFP