

Sweden to issue int'l warrant for Assange

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In this July 27, 2010 file photo, founder and editor of the WikiLeaks website, Julian Assange, speaks to members of the media during a debate event held in London. A Swedish prosecutor has asked for a court order to detain WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for questioning on suspicions of rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion.(AP Photo/Max Nash, File)

(AP) -- The elusive Australian behind the biggest leak of U.S. war documents in history is wanted by Sweden in a drawn-out rape probe, and could soon face an international arrest warrant curtailing his ability to jump from one country to another.

A Swedish court on Thursday approved a motion to bring Julian Assange, the 39-year-old founder of [WikiLeaks](#), into custody for questioning. The decision paves the way for [prosecutors](#) to seek his arrest abroad through Interpol.

Assange, whose whereabouts are unknown, is suspected of rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion. He has denied the allegations, which stem from his encounters with two women during a visit to Sweden in August.

His lawyer in Britain, Mark Stephens, said Assange had consensual sex with both women who then turned on him after becoming aware of each other's relationships.

The irregular evolution of the case, in which prosecutors of different ranks have overruled each other, has sparked questions about Sweden's legal system and conspiracy theories about intelligence agencies seeking to silence and discredit Assange and WikiLeaks.

The site has published almost 500,000 secret U.S. documents about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Governments and some of Assange's own colleagues have denounced him for releasing Afghan documents that contained the names of Afghan intelligence sources for NATO forces, saying that could place the sources' lives at risk.

After the sex charges first appeared in August, Assange was quoted by a Swedish tabloid as saying he'd been warned that the [Pentagon](#) planned to use dirty tricks to spoil things for WikiLeaks.

He later told Sweden's TV4 he wasn't pointing fingers at anyone.

"That doesn't mean that [intelligence agencies](#) are behind this, nor does it mean they are not behind it, nor does it mean once this has happened, for other reasons, that they are not capitalizing on it," he said.

The team behind WikiLeaks is small, reportedly just a half-dozen people

and casual volunteers who offer their services as needed. Assange has no permanent address and travels frequently - jumping from one friend's place to the next, occasionally disappearing from public view for months at a time, only to reappear in the full glare of the cameras at packed news conferences to discuss his site's latest disclosure.

Assange had considered setting up a base for WikiLeaks in Sweden, where some of its servers are located, but Swedish immigration authorities denied him a residence permit. Earlier this month, he said he was considering immigrating to Switzerland instead.

Swedish prosecutors questioned Assange on Aug. 30. Director of Public Prosecution Marianne Ny said she sought Thursday's court order to detain him because attempts to question him again had failed.

"So far, we have not been able to meet with him to accomplish the interrogation," she said.

His lawyer lashed out at the Swedish investigators, saying Assange had offered to be questioned in Sweden and in Britain, in person or by phone, videoconferencing, e-mail, or to make a sworn statement.

"All of these offers have been flatly refused by a prosecutor who is abusing her powers by insisting that he return to Sweden," Stephens said. He added that the allegations were "false and without basis."

Court documents filed by the prosecutor show Assange is suspected of raping and sexually molesting a woman in the town of Enköping, in central Sweden. He's suspected of sexual molestation and unlawful coercion of the second woman, in Stockholm.

A police report obtained by The Associated Press shows that both women had met Assange in connection with a seminar he gave in

Stockholm on Aug. 14. The report shows the women filed their complaints together six days later.

Stephens said the basis of the allegations seems to be a "dispute over consensual, but unprotected sex" days after it occurred.

"Both women have declared that they had consensual sexual relations with our client and that they continued to instigate friendly contact well after the alleged incidents," he said. "Only after the women became aware of each other's relationships with Mr. Assange did they make their allegations against him."

The Swedish rape law is broader than similar laws in many other countries, partly because it covers rape within relationships.

Following a revision in 2005, the threshold for what is considered coercion to a sexual act was lowered, and the definition of rape was widened to include all sexual acts, instead of only intercourse. The change also meant that someone who has sex with an underaged, unconscious, drunk, or sleeping person can be convicted of rape.

"Sweden uses the designation rape in a way no other country uses it," said lawyer Per E. Samuelsson, a fierce critic of the sex crime law. "Lawmakers have gone one step too far in their eagerness to achieve something with the sex offense law."

Investigators initially disagreed on how to deal with Assange's case.

A Stockholm prosecutor opened a rape investigation on Aug. 20, that was dropped by the city's chief prosecutor a day later. Ny reopened it the following week.

Bjorn Hurtig, a Swedish lawyer who represented Assange at the

detention hearing in Stockholm, said he thought the evidence presented by prosecutors was "very meager."

"It's not enough to get him convicted for crime," he said.

Hurtig said he would consider appealing the court order, but that it would require a power of attorney from Assange.

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