

The noose tightens around WikiLeaks' Assange

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In this Nov. 4, 2010 file photo, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange speaks during a news conference at the Geneva press club, in Geneva, Switzerland. Assange's legal options narrowed on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2010 as he lost an appeal against a court order for his arrest and his British lawyer said authorities knew his precise location. (AP Photo/Keystone, Martial Trezzini, File)

(AP) -- The law is closing in on Julian Assange. Swedish authorities won a court ruling Thursday in their bid to arrest the WikiLeaks founder for questioning in a rape case, British intelligence is said to know where he's hiding, and U.S. pundits and politicians are demanding he be hunted down or worse.

The former computer hacker who has embarrassed the U.S. government and foreign leaders with his online release of a huge trove of secret

American diplomatic cables suffered a legal setback when Sweden's Supreme Court upheld an order to detain him - a move that could lead to his extradition.

Meanwhile, Assange continues to leak sensitive documents. Newly posted cables on WikiLeaks' website detailed a host of embarrassing disclosures, including allegations that Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi accepted kickbacks and a deeply unflattering assessment of Turkmenistan's president.

Assange is accused in Sweden of rape, sexual molestation and coercion in a case from August, and Swedish officials have alerted Interpol and issued a European arrest warrant to bring him in for questioning.

The 39-year-old Australian denies the charges, which his lawyer, Mark Stephens, said apparently stemmed from a "dispute over consensual but unprotected sex." Stephens said the case is turning into an exercise in persecution.

While Assange has not made a public appearance for nearly a month, his lawyer insisted authorities know where to find him.

"Both the British and the Swedish authorities know how to contact him, and the security services know exactly where he is," Stephens told The Associated Press.

It was unclear if or when police would act on Sweden's demands. Police there acknowledged Thursday they would have to refile their European arrest warrant after British authorities asked for more details on the maximum penalties for all three crimes Assange is suspected of.

Scotland Yard declined comment, as did the Serious and Organized Crime Agency, responsible for processing European arrest warrants for

suspects in England - where The Guardian claims Assange is hiding out.

Stephens - who also represents the AP on media-related matters - said that if Assange were ever served with a warrant, he would fight it in British court. "The process in this case has been so utterly irregular that the chances of a valid arrest warrant being submitted to me are very small," he said.

The Swedish case has been subject to a great deal of back and forth, with Swedish prosecutors repeatedly overruling each other and disagreeing over whether to classify the most serious accusation as rape.

WikiLeaks spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson said late Wednesday that the organization was trying to keep Assange's location a secret for security reasons. He noted that commentators in the United States and Canada have called for Assange to be hunted down or killed.

Sarah Palin likened Assange to an al-Qaida propagandist and accused him, without offering any proof, of having "blood on his hands."

"Why was he not pursued with the same urgency we pursue al-Qaida and Taliban leaders?" she asked in a message posted to her Facebook page.

Republican Rep. Peter King of New York called for Assange to be charged under the Espionage Act and asked whether WikiLeaks can be designated a terrorist organization.

"I think Assange should be assassinated, actually," Tom Flanagan, a former adviser to Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, told the CBC. "I think Obama should put out a contract or maybe use a drone or something." Flanagan, a U.S.-born professor of political science at the University of Calgary, later apologized.

U.S. government lawyers are investigating whether Assange could be prosecuted for espionage, a senior American defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said earlier this week. WikiLeaks has not said how it obtained the documents, but the government's prime suspect is an Army private, Bradley Manning, who is in the brig on charges of leaking other classified documents to WikiLeaks.

One batch of the latest leaked dispatches - these from the U.S. Embassy staff in Turkmenistan - portrays the president of the former Soviet state in Central Asia, Gurbanguli Berdymukhamedov, as "vain, suspicious, guarded, strict, very conservative, a practiced liar," and "not a very bright guy."

According to another one of the cables, Georgia's ambassador in Rome claimed that Berlusconi was promised a cut of the profits in energy deals with Russia. Berlusconi denied the allegation.

The documents also included a frank assessment from the American envoy to Stockholm about Sweden's historic policy of nonalignment - a policy that the U.S. ambassador, Michael Woods, seemed to suggest was for public consumption only.

Sweden's military and intelligence cooperation with the U.S. "give the lie to the official policy" of non-participation in military alliances, Woods said. He added in a separate cable that Sweden's defense minister fondly remembers his time as a high school student in America and "loves the U.S."

Woods cautioned American officials not to trumpet Sweden-U.S. cooperation in the fight against terrorism too openly, because that would open up the Swedish government to domestic criticism.

In England, meanwhile, a front-page story in The Guardian alleged that

one of the leaked cables showed British politicians trying to keep Parliament in the dark over the storage of American cluster bombs on British territory - despite an international ban on the weapons. Britain's Foreign Office denied the charge.

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