

A year on, Assange stays put in Ecuadorean Embassy

June 19 2013, by Jill Lawless



In this photo taken on Friday, June 14, 2013, Julian Assange speaks to the media inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London ahead of the first anniversary of his arrival there on June 19, 2012. A year ago, Julian Assange skipped out on a date with Swedish justice. Rather than comply with a British order that he go to the Scandinavian country for questioning about sex-crimes allegations, the WikiLeaks founder took refuge in Ecuador's London embassy. (AP Photo/Anthony Devlin, Pool)

A year ago, Julian Assange skipped out on a date with Swedish justice. Rather than comply with a British order that he go to the Scandinavian country for questioning about sex crimes allegations, the WikiLeaks founder took refuge in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London.

He's still there—and now says he won't emerge even if Sweden drops the case that triggered the strange diplomatic standoff.

In comments that appear to put a resolution farther off than ever, Assange said his fear of U.S.-ordered arrest for his secret-spilling activities means that "if the Swedish government immediately drops their request tomorrow, I still cannot leave this embassy."

"If I walk out the front door I could be arrested in relation to the United States," Assange said in an interview with a small group of journalists to mark Wednesday's one-year anniversary of his embassy stay.

Assange believes extradition to Sweden is merely a first step in efforts to remove him to the U.S., where he has infuriated officials by publishing secret documents including 250,000 State Department cables. U.S. Army soldier Bradley Manning has admitted passing those documents to WikiLeaks.

Assange spent almost two years fighting extradition over alleged 2010 assaults on two Swedish women, which he denies. In June 2012, the U.K. Supreme Court ruled against him, prompting his asylum bid with Ecuador, whose leftist government had expressed support.

As long as he stays inside the South American country's embassy—a ground-floor apartment in an elegant building close to the ritzy Harrods department store—he is beyond the reach of British authorities.

But police officers are stationed outside and in the lobby around the clock, in case he makes a break for it. London police said the cost of the embassy operation was 3.8 million pounds (nearly \$6 million) up until the end of May.

Assange, a former [computer hacker](#) and avowed enemy of state secrecy whose public image projects absolute self-certainty, doesn't publicly admit second thoughts about his asylum-seeking move.

"Strategically, it's been exactly what I had hoped for," he said. He remains in the news, thanks in part to a stream of celebrity visitors to his embassy hideaway, including Lady Gaga and Vivienne Westwood.

But the 41-year-old Australian acknowledges that his year indoors has been a taken a physical toll. His pallid skin is now a whiter shade of pale. He speaks in a quiet throaty rumble, sipping occasionally from a mug bearing the logo of heavy metal band AC/DC.

He denies he has suffered poor health, dismissing reports of chest problems as "lung-gate." He exercises regularly—one supporter donated a running machine—and has used a sun lamp to compensate for the lack of natural light.

But apart from occasional forays onto the embassy's tiny balcony to address pro-WikiLeaks demonstrators, he hasn't been outside in a year.

"I haven't had any sunlight in a year, which is obviously dangerous because you can get rickets," he said.

"The physical circumstance here is of course difficult. It's an unnatural environment and therefore it takes diligence to stay healthy."

Assange speaks quietly and deliberately, but he is still full of fire at what

he calls the U.S. authorities' "disgraceful" pursuit of WikiLeaks and prosecution of Manning.

He praises Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor who leaked details of U.S. surveillance programs, as a hero—and the embodiment of "the ideals that I have fought for, for so long."

Assange believes there is already a sealed indictment against him in the U.S., and possibly already an American [extradition](#) request. He says he won't leave the embassy "until the British government (gives) some sort of information or guarantee that I would have safe passage."

That's unwelcome news for Britain, which says it has a duty to arrest Assange for breach of bail and send him to Sweden.

Foreign Secretary William Hague and his Ecuadorean counterpart Ricardo Patino met Monday to discuss the case. Britain's Foreign Office said the two sides had agreed to set up a working group, "but no substantive progress was made."

Patino said Assange was prepared "to stay in our embassy for at least five years," but Assange hopes it won't be that long.

When he entered a year ago, "I thought six months to two years. I still think that now."

Some of his statements suggest a pragmatic, even conciliatory, streak. He expresses hope that a solution to his quandary will come from a face-saving compromise rather than a dramatic victory.

He says Hague's comments over the past year have been "counterproductive" but feels "the rest of the British government

publicly have done the right thing" by avoiding public pronouncements on the case.

He is cool to the idea of Ecuador taking his asylum case to the International Court of Justice, because "once that process has started it could take years."

"We didn't want to take a fluid political situation and turn it into a moribund legal situation that would be expensive and time-consuming," he said.

Despite his confinement, Assange insists he is not bored. He says he work up to 17 hours a day—keeping WikiLeaks ticking, directing the legal battle against a financial blockade imposed on the group by Visa and MasterCard, planning his campaign for Australia's September election, in which Assange will run for the newly founded [WikiLeaks Party](#).

He is even writing music with Puerto Rican rap act Calle 13. Assange says they are working on "a song about the new politics that has come about as a result of the Internet and media distortion."

"Where do people get this crazy idea that I have time on my hands?"

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