
Julian Assange says COVID-19 is raging through British prison

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Julian Assange has revealed to a friend the harrowing details of his life in Belmarsh prison in London. WikiLeaks founder is still confined at the UK maximum security prison, despite it being stricken with the novel coronavirus.

COVID-19 has spread around Belmarsh to such an extent that the prison is “barely functioning” any more at all, British freelance video journalist Vaughan Smith has revealed in a Facebook post, after talking with Assange by phone.

As many as 150 prison staff members have been forced into self-isolation as they might have contracted the coronavirus, Smith said. The prison admitted in mid-March that the disease already reached its premises and even reported one coronavirus-linked inmate death.

Reports say that the WikiLeaks founder has to spend almost 24 hours alone in his cell as the prison apparently strives to limit any contact to stem the spread of the disease. Yet Assange and other inmates spend the half an hour of exercise they are still allowed in a yard crowded with others, according to his friend.

Smith has already reported on the WikiLeaks founder’s condition in Belmarsh before. The journalist, who has known Assange for years, raised alarm about his health back in 2019 following another phone call, which made Smith think his friend had been drugged in jail.

The Prison Governors’ Association recently said that 15,000 non-violent inmates should be released from British jails to stop the spread of the COVID-19 there. The Justice Department then suggested releasing just 4,000 of them. Only some 100 people have been set free, Smith notes, adding that Assange apparently did not make the list.

Assange’s treatment by the British authorities is nothing short of a “national disgrace,” the journalist said. The UK

has refused to set him free despite repeated pleas from various activists, doctors, Australian MPs and even the UN torture rapporteur. The British government has also carried on with Assange's extradition hearings, at a time when he is unable to consult with his lawyers to properly prepare his defense, Smith added.

Julian Assange has been denied bail by the British justice system as he awaits a decision on his extradition to the United States, on clearly political charges of conspiring to hack government computers and breaking espionage laws. His "crime" was revealing war crimes and crimes against humanity by the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan.
