

Assange's Trial for U.S. Extradition Begins in London

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The case for extradition to the U.S. began on Monday, as thousands of protesters show their support to Assange.

The first day of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's legal battle to prevent his extradition to the United States began on Monday amid strong social protests in support of the Australian journalist.

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The case for Assange's extradition to the U.S. was opened at Woolwich Crown Court in southeast London as the sound of protest was heard in the distance. The slogans "Free Julian Assange", "Journalism is not a crime", "Free press, Free Assange", were repeated over and over again in the crowd.

Celebrities such as Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters, Pretenders singer Chrissie Hynde, and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood have joined the wave of protests taking place since last Saturday, to protest spying charges against Assange.

"Assange is an innocent man, wrongly accused. The only reason he is on trial is for exposing

information that is inconvenient for the United States government," Roger Waters has told reporters.

However, lawyers acting for the U.S. government have said on the first day of the legal battle that Assange "is not charged with disclosure of embarrassing or awkward information that the government would rather not have disclosed. The disclosures charges are solely where there was a risk of risk."

James Lewis QC, one of the U.S. government's lawyers, added that "by disseminating material in an unredacted form Assange knowingly put human rights activists, dissidents, journalists and their families at risk of serious harm in states operated by oppressive regimes."

The Australian journalist, accused of working with former U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning to leak classified documents, faces charges of "theft and computer hacking, and of published information and identification of informants in Iraq and Afghanistan knowing they would be at risk of harm," Lewis said.

Assange's defense seeks to suggest that the risk to these individuals who, by having the individuals revealed as informants, is somehow overstated.

"But I would remind the court that these were individuals who were passing on information on regimes such as Iran and organizations such as al-Qaida," said Lewis.

"Journalism is not an excuse for breaking the law," Lewis concluded in Woolwich Crown Court.

Assange's case has received worldwide support. The Council of Europe's human rights commissioner commented last week that "Assange should not be extradited because of the potential impact on press freedom and concerns about the real risk of torture or inhuman or degrading treatment.

"Assange will face what is a death sentence if he is sent to the United States," said the father of the Australian journalist, John Shipton.
