



LONDON — WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was forcibly bundled out of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and into a British police van on Thursday, setting up a potential court battle over attempts to extradite him to the U.S. to face charges related to the publication of tens of thousands of secret government documents.

Police arrested Assange after the South American nation decided to revoke the political asylum that had given him sanctuary for almost seven years. Ecuador's President Lenin Moreno said he took the action due to "repeated violations to international conventions and daily life."

In Washington, the U.S. Justice Department accused Assange with conspiring with Chelsea Manning to break into a classified government computer at the Pentagon. The charge was announced after Assange was taken into custody.

His lawyer has previously said that Assange planned to fight any U.S. charges against him.

Assange took refuge in the embassy in 2012 after he was released on bail in Britain while facing extradition to Sweden on sexual assault allegations that have since been dropped. He refused to leave the embassy, fearing arrest and extradition to the U.S. for publishing classified military and diplomatic cables through WikiLeaks.

Over the years, Assange used the embassy as a staging post to keep his name before the public, frequently making appearances on its tiny balcony, posing for pictures and reading statements. Even his cat became well-known.

But his presence was an embarrassment to U.K. authorities, who for years kept a police presence around the clock outside the embassy, costing taxpayers millions

in police overtime. Such surveillance was removed years ago, but the embassy remained a focal point for his activities.

Video posted online by Ruptly, a news service of Russia Today, showed several men in suits pulling Assange out of the embassy and loading him into a police van while uniformed British police formed a passageway. Assange sported a full beard and slicked-back gray hair.

He later appeared in Westminster Magistrates' Court, where District Judge Michael Snow wasted no time in finding him guilty of breaching his bail conditions, flatly rejecting his assertion that he had not had a fair hearing and a reasonable excuse for not appearing.

"Mr. Assange's behavior is that of a narcissist who cannot get beyond his own selfish interests," Snow said. "He hasn't come close to establishing 'reasonable excuse.'"

Assange waved to the packed public gallery as he was taken away to the cells. His next appearance was set for May 2 via prison video-link in relation to the extradition case.

Speaking in Parliament, British Prime Minister Theresa May said the arrest shows that "no one is above the law."

Moreno said in a video posted on Twitter that Ecuador was no longer willing to give Assange protection. Other Ecuadorian officials in Quito accused supporters of WikiLeaks and two Russian hackers of trying to destabilize the country.

"The discourteous and aggressive behavior of Mr. Julian Assange, the hostile and threatening declarations of its allied organization, against Ecuador, and especially the transgression of international treaties, have led the situation to a point where the asylum of Mr. Assange is unsustainable and no longer viable," Moreno said.

Assange has been under U.S. Justice Department scrutiny for years for WikiLeaks' role in publishing thousands of government secrets. He was an important figure in the special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe as investigators examined how WikiLeaks obtained emails that were stolen from Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and Democratic groups.

WikiLeaks quickly drew attention to U.S. interest in Assange and said that Ecuador had illegally terminated Assange's political asylum "in violation of international law."

"Powerful actors, including CIA, are engaged in a sophisticated effort to de-humanise, de-legitimize and imprison him," the group said in a tweet over a photo of Assange's smiling face.

But Moreno appeared to suggest that a swift extradition to America was not likely.

"In line with our strong commitment to human rights and international law, I requested Great Britain to guarantee that Mr. Assange would not be extradited to a country where he could face torture or the death penalty," Moreno said. "The British government has confirmed it in writing, in accordance with its own rules."

Assange's arrest came a day after WikiLeaks accused the Ecuador's government of an "extensive spying operation" against him. WikiLeaks claims that meetings with lawyers and a doctor inside the embassy over the past year were secretly filmed.

In Quito on Thursday, Ecuador's government denounced what they called attempts by supporters of WikiLeaks and two Russian hackers to destabilize their country as its standoff with Assange intensified in recent weeks.

Ecuador Interior Minister Maria Paula Romo said a close collaborator of WikiLeaks had traveled with former Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino this year to several countries — including Peru, Spain and Venezuela — in an attempt to undermine the Ecuadorian government. She did not identify the person but said their name and those of the two Russian hackers working in Ecuador would be turned over to judicial authorities.

She also said Ecuador's embassy in Spain and other diplomatic missions abroad have received threats related.

Assange's arrest drew a mixed reaction.

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt thanked Moreno for breaking the impasse, saying on Twitter that Assange "is no hero and no one is above the law."

But Edward Snowden, the former security contractor who leaked classified information about U.S. surveillance programs, called Assange's arrest a blow to media freedom.

"Images of Ecuador's ambassador inviting the U.K.'s secret police into the embassy to drag a publisher of —like it or not — award-winning journalism out of the building are going to end up in the history books," Snowden said in a tweet.

"Assange's critics may cheer, but this is a dark moment for press freedom," Snowden said from Russia, which has granted him permission to stay there while he is wanted by the U.S.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said Russia wants Assange's rights to be protected following his arrest. Dmitry Peskov told reporters that he could not comment on the overall case but "we of course hope that all of his rights will be observed."

An independent U.N. human rights expert said he won't relent in his efforts to determine whether Assange's privacy rights were violated at the embassy in London. Joe Cannataci, the special rapporteur on privacy, had planned to travel to London on April 25 to meet with Assange and said he still planned to do so — wherever Assange is at the time.

"I will visit him and speak to him in a police station or elsewhere in the U.K. where he may be held," Cannataci said.

Associated Press writers Kelvin Chan and Gregory Katz in London and Eric Tucker in Washington contributed.