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PC.DEL/252/20
5 March 2020

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1261st MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

5 March 2020

On the Julian Assange case

Mr. Chairperson,

The situation regarding the Australian journalist and publicist Julian Assange, who in April last year was forcibly arrested and removed from the Ecuadorian embassy in London by British police and has been in prison since then, continues to cause concern. A further stage of hearings on the case for his extradition to the United States of America will begin in May. In a statement issued in this regard, Reporters Without Borders pointed out that the founder of WikiLeaks “has had insufficient opportunity to prepare for th[ese] hearing[s]” and that “his lawyers do not have adequate access to him in prison”.

Of grave concern are the conditions under which Mr. Assange is being detained at Belmarsh prison in the United Kingdom, which in human rights circles has been dubbed “Britain’s Guantánamo Bay” on account of its exceptionally harsh incarceration regime. Human rights institutions have described the way he is treated there as “cruel” and the state of his health as “critical”. Significantly, Mr. Assange is being denied access to health care and to proper nutrition, and he is constantly subjected to ruthless psychological torture.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Mr. Nils Melzer, has put it, “this case has never been about Mr. Assange’s guilt or innocence, but about making him pay the price for exposing serious governmental misconduct, including alleged war crimes and corruption. ... Mr. Assange’s continued exposure to arbitrariness and abuse may soon end up costing his life.” So far as we know, an appeal on that score addressed by Mr. Melzer to the British authorities has remained unanswered. Moreover, they have not taken any steps whatsoever towards improving the conditions of imprisonment for Mr. Assange or to investigate the allegations of psychological torture.

A similar appeal to conduct a thorough medical examination of Mr. Assange was made by a group of medical doctors from Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States and several other countries, who jointly published an open letter to UK Home Secretary Priti Patel on the Internet in November 2019. However, that letter, too, has remained unanswered. This is a clear case of the UK Government on the one hand ignoring the threat to the life and health of the founder of WikiLeaks, and on the other violating its commitments to freedom of speech, freedom of the media, and the safety of journalists.

We recall that the participating States confirmed, in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and reaffirmed, in the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990, that the right to freedom of expression “include[s] freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”. In the 2018 Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists, the participating States recognized “the importance of investigative journalism, and that the ability of [the] media to investigate, and to publish the results of their investigations, including on the Internet, without fear of reprisal, can play an important role in our societies, including in holding public institutions and officials accountable”.

The persecution of Mr. Assange has been condemned not only by the aforementioned individuals and organizations but also by a number of members of the European Parliament and the Bundestag, and by representatives of the journalistic community and NGOs, who are all in agreement that this case has a political background and is in effect an act of retaliation by the US Government for the disclosure in 2010 of crimes perpetrated by the US armed forces against the civilian population in Iraq and Afghanistan. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, and the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Dunja Mijatović, have appealed directly to the British authorities not to extradite the embattled journalist.

We likewise exhort the United Kingdom to refrain from handing over Mr. Assange and to put an end to the persecution he is suffering. We know that we can expect to hear in reply that the “impartiality” of the rulings made by the independent British judiciary should be trusted. However, the political nature of the punishment being meted out to Mr. Assange is obvious to an overwhelming majority of the global human rights community. The only difference here is that Mr. Assange dared to assume that the principles of ensuring freedom of speech and upholding the right of society to know the truth about the activities of their governments – principles taken for granted by the US Government, which so likes to accuse others of failing to abide by them – were also applicable to the United States. This could now end up costing the brave journalist his life.

We would remind you that in the United States the death penalty is still applied. However, even if his life were to be spared, Mr. Assange’s extradition could still lead to his facing up to 175 years in prison. We have a very good idea of how the prison system in that country works. Everyone has heard the story of the Russian citizen Mariya Butina, who spent over a year in a US jail after her arrest on preposterous political charges. What is more, the United States continues to hold other Russian citizens in prison, notably Viktor Bout and Konstantin Yaroshenko. The latter, who has been suffering from various ailments for many years, is being denied access to appropriate medical assistance.

In our statements we have repeatedly drawn attention to the conditions of imprisonment in the United States, where prisoners are subjected to interrogations that make use of torture and other kinds of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. To cite just one example, some forty inmates are currently being held in the infamous Guantánamo prison without charge or trial. We once again call on the US Government to respect its international commitments in this area and to put a stop to the politically motivated persecution of Mr. Assange.

Thank you for your attention.