

‘I pleaded guilty to journalism,’ Wikileaks’ Assange

AFP – Wikileaks founder Julian Assange on Tuesday said he was released after years of incarceration only because he had pleaded guilty to doing “journalism”, which he described as a pillar of a free society.

Assange spent most of the last 14 years either holed up in the Ecuadoran embassy in London to avoid arrest, or locked up at Belmarsh Prison in the British capital.

He was released from jail in June, after serving a sentence for publishing hundreds of thousands of confidential US government documents.

“I am not free today because the system worked. I am free today after years of incarceration because I pleaded guilty to journalism,” Assange told the Council of Europe rights body at its Strasbourg headquarters in his first public comments since his release.

“I eventually chose freedom over unrealisable justice... justice for me is now precluded,” Assange said, noting he had been facing a 175-year jail sentence.

Speaking calmly and flanked by his wife Stella who fought for his release, he added: “Journalism is not a crime, it is a pillar of a free and informed society.”

“The fundamental issue is simple. Journalists should not be prosecuted for doing their jobs,” said Assange.

The trove of confidential documents released by Wikileaks included searingly frank US State Department descriptions of foreign leaders, accounts of extrajudicial killings and intelligence gathering against allies.

Assange argued his case provided an insight into “how powerful intelligence organisations engage in transnational repression” against their foes, adding that this “cannot become the norm here.”

– ‘More impunity, more secrecy’ –

He said that during his incarceration “ground has been lost”, regretting that he now sees “more impunity, more secrecy and more retaliation for telling the truth.”

“Freedom of expression and all that flows from it is at a dark crossroads,” he told the hearing of the legal committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

“Let us all commit to doing our part to ensure the light of freedom never dims and the pursuit of truth will live on and the voices of many are not silenced by the interests of the few,” he said.

Assange’s case remains deeply contentious.

Supporters hail him as a champion of free speech and say he was persecuted by authorities and unfairly imprisoned. Detractors see him as a reckless blogger whose uncensored publication of ultra-sensitive documents put lives at risk and jeopardised US security.

US President Joe Biden, who is likely to issue some pardons before leaving office next January, has previously described Assange as a “terrorist”.

Assange’s timing and his choice of venue have puzzled some observers.

The Council of Europe brings together the 46 signatory states of the European Convention on Human Rights, with little say over Assange’s legal fate.

Assange is still campaigning for a US presidential pardon for

his conviction under the Espionage Act.

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