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As Ecuador prepared to announce its decision on granting asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Britain threatened to raid the Ecuadorean embassy in London where Assange has taken refuge for the past two months. Britain told Ecuador that giving Julian Assange asylum would not change a thing and that it might still revoke the diplomatic status of Quito's embassy in London to allow the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder to Sweden to face questioning over alleged sexual misconduct. We're joined by Michael Ratner, an attorney for Julian Assange and president emeritus of the Center for Constitutional Rights, and by Ben Griffin, an activist with Veterans for Peace UK, participating in a vigil in support of Assange outside the Ecuadorean embassy in London. "Is this really about the U.S. being the 'hidden hand' behind what the British are doing so that they can eventually get a hold of Julian Assange, try him for espionage and put him into a jail?" Ratner asks. "That's what's really going on here. Let's not kid ourselves."

Guests:

[Michael Ratner](#) , president emeritus of the Center for Constitutional Rights and a legal adviser to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

[Ben Griffin](#) , activist with Veterans for Peace UK and a veteran of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He's joining us from the Ecuadorean embassy in London, where he's been showing support for Julian Assange.

Transcript

AMY GOODMAN: *The New York Times* is reporting the government of Ecuador is prepared to allow WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to remain in its embassy in London indefinitely under a type of humanitarian protection. Assange has been holed up in the embassy for two months, seeking asylum, but as of this broadcast, Ecuador has not made an official announcement, though it may be making one as we broadcast, and we'll let you know.

Over the past 12 hours, there have been a number of dramatic developments. On Wednesday, Britain threatened to raid Ecuador's embassy in London if Quito did not hand over Assange. A British foreign spokesperson said, quote, "Under British law we can give them a week's notice before entering the premises and the embassy will no longer have diplomatic protection." Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño responded to the British threat.

RICARDO PATIÑO: [translated] Today we've received from the United Kingdom a clear and written threat that they could storm our embassy in London if Ecuador refuses to hand in Julian Assange. We want to make it absolutely clear that we are not a British colony, and that the times of colonialism are over.

AMY GOODMAN: Earlier today, Britain told Ecuador that giving Julian Assange asylum would not change a thing and that it might still revoke the diplomatic status of Ecuador's embassy in London to allow the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder. Julian Assange is attempting to avoid extradition to Sweden for questioning over sex crime accusations. His lawyers say he fears Sweden will extradite him to the United States. Ecuador said any attempt to remove the diplomatic status of its embassy would be considered a hostile and intolerable act.

This is Baltasar Garzón, the famed Spanish judge and prosecutor, now an attorney for Julian Assange.

BALTASAR GARZÓN: [translated] Hypothetically, if asylum is granted, Great Britain can't say they won't send him. One can always say no. We are tired of seeing international conventions being breached or not agreed with by different countries. But legally, they can't do it, because Ecuador is a sovereign state, a free, democratic state, exactly like the United States. Nothing more, nothing less.

AMY GOODMAN: For more on the latest developments, we're joined by Michael Ratner, an attorney for Julian Assange, president emeritus of the Center for Constitutional Rights here in New York, joining us by *Democracy Now!* video stream.

Michael, can you talk about what is the latest that you understand at this point? Ecuador

holding a news conference as we speak, they're holding it in Spanish, and they're extremely—they started off by talking about how critical they are of Britain, saying it's violating international law for threatening the Ecuadorean embassy in London.

MICHAEL RATNER: You know, Amy, we don't know what answer the Ecuadoreans are going to give. We know that today they're deciding on whether to give Julian Assange asylum or not. We're obviously been on pins and needles about this. We're hopeful that they will. Julian Assange has every right to asylum under the law. The law is clear. The U.S. itself actually gives asylum to people who are journalists, whistleblowers. They've done it for Chinese journalists and others. So the idea that he might not be entitled to asylum is completely outrageous to me. The fact that the British—and I was as shocked as anybody—that the British said yesterday that they might invade the embassy to get their hands on Julian Assange is such an incredible violation of international law that it's unheard of. I mean, think about had the Chinese gone into the U.S. embassy to get Chen out in China, or had the Brazilians gone into the Honduran embassy to get Zelaya out. This is unheard of in law, it's unheard of in diplomacy, and it's an outrageous and egregious undermining of the right of a country to give asylum. Asylum is considered to be a humanitarian and apolitical act. You undercut that, obviously, not just for Julian Assange but for every person who seeks asylum in the world, by saying another country can simply grab him.

AMY GOODMAN: We are joined right now outside the Ecuadorean embassy in London by Ben Griffin, an activist with Veterans for Peace UK, a veteran. Ben, why are you standing outside the embassy right now?

BEN GRIFFIN: ...Julian as a persecuted war resister. This guy has released the Iraq War Diaries, the Afghan War Diaries, the "Collateral Murder" video. He's done more to highlight the true cost, the true nature of war, so we've been supporting Julian since he—since he was threatened with extradition almost two years ago.

AMY GOODMAN: You're a veteran of both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Can you talk about why you think WikiLeaks has served your cause?

BEN GRIFFIN: Sure. I mean, I served—my last conflict was the war in Iraq. I came back from that conflict and started to speak out about what the true nature of that war was and what we were doing out there, and I was taken to the High Court and silenced. People always said to me, "Where's your evidence?" People say to other veterans in my organization, "Oh, well,

what do you know? You're just a soldier." And Julian provided us with all the evidence we need: the "Collateral Murder" video, which shows a helicopter gunship killing innocent civilians; the Afghan War Logs, you know, which describe torture and death on a daily basis; the Iraq War Logs, which again highlight the real numbers of those killed in Iraq, people who weren't even known about before those logs came out. So this guy, for me, has done a great service to the world in showing us the true nature of the wars that our governments ask us to fight in.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the pressure outside the embassy right now? I've been watching since late last night a live stream outside the Ecuadorean embassy because of the concern that the British authorities would raid the embassy and take Julian Assange out.

BEN GRIFFIN: Sure. Last night, I got to the embassy about midnight. There was a police presence there, and, to me, the police presence was a static one and one of uniformed officers rather than the sort of officers who would make a raid. That's still the case now. My personal opinion is that the police and the home secretary and the British government have tried to put political pressure, have tried to put real pressure on Ecuador, the Ecuadorean embassy and WikiLeaks to try to stop them from making the decision to grant asylum. I think this—the levels of police and the threats that were given to the—in Ecuador are actually a big bluff. I don't think the British would dare to invade the sovereign territory of another embassy. It would cause too many problems around the world. What would—you know, the British ambassadors and diplomatic staff around the world would then be, you know, threatened by any sort of—any group and any country that just decided they didn't like the British. So I think they've got to be very careful about it, and I don't actually expect any raid on the embassy in London.

AMY GOODMAN: We just want to turn for just 20 seconds to the foreign minister, who is—the Ecuadorean foreign minister is speaking right now. We believe this is a preface to their announcement of Julian—announcing that Julian Assange can stay in the Ecuadorean embassy in London. But this is what's happening right now.

RICARDO PATIÑO: [speaking in Spanish]

AMY GOODMAN: We will go back to Ricardo Patiño.

RICARDO PATIÑO: [speaking in Spanish]

AMY GOODMAN: Michael Ratner, right now, so far, the foreign minister, Patiño, is rebuking the British government. He is saying that Ecuador is a free, democratic state that is not subject to any foreign influence. He has said, "We are dissatisfied with the British government because we have not received yet any apology." And he said, "We are not subject to the tutelage of any foreign entity." Michael Ratner?

MICHAEL RATNER: Amy, I just heard briefly what you said. It came in and out. But the Ecuadoreans have been very strong about this assault on their sovereignty. They've said they're being treated as if they're still a colony. And they've been incredibly strong. And what the British are doing here really smacks utterly of what the British have done as an empire for hundreds, if not a thousand, years, in terms of thinking they can just kick around other countries. Let me tell you, if Ecuador was the United States, there would be no way they would be threatening Ecuador with going into their embassy.

And you have to ask yourself what's really going on here. Is this really about the United States being the, quote, "hidden hand" behind what the British are doing so that they can eventually get a hold of Julian Assange, try him for espionage and put him into a jail, where he will be treated really terribly, much like Bradley Manning? That's what's really going on here. Let's not kid ourselves. The United States will do anything it can to get its hands on Julian Assange, even push the British to violate the inviolable, the diplomatic embassy in England, which is completely, as I said earlier, unheard of in diplomatic law that you would go in and actually seize someone out of an embassy.

AMY GOODMAN: Michael Ratner, to those who say, "Why doesn't he simply go to Sweden to answer the questions about sexually abusing two women?" why can't he go and do that?

MICHAEL RATNER: The issue on that is, first, he has offered—and the Ecuadorean government—to try and avoid this situation that would escalate it, asked Sweden if they would be willing to come to the United Kingdom and question Julian Assange. Let's remember, this is about allegations and about questioning. There's been no charges, no crime, etc., charge. It's about questioning. So they asked Sweden if they would come. Sweden so far has said, no, they won't. Sweden could have avoided this in two seconds by that.

But it's really not about Sweden. If Julian Assange were to go to Sweden, he would be put in jail immediately. He is not allowed to get bail in Sweden. Let's understand that. He would be in prison in Sweden, and he could no longer apply for asylum. You can't apply for asylum from a jail when you're in the very country that's meaning to persecute you or prosecute you. He's just in Sweden. At that point, the U.S. files its extradition request. Julian Assange never sees the light of day and winds up going to the United States.

His only choice, when he made the choice, was either to go to Sweden, get put in jail and wind up in the United States, or take the risk that he could get political asylum from Ecuador and, thereby, ultimately, get out of the hands of the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Ecuador's Foreign Affairs Minister Patiño is saying—as we speak, he's saying this in Spanish in his announcement, saying Julian Assange's actions are protected under freedom of speech and freedom of the press. He says if Assange ended up in the United States, he would not get a fair trial. Michael Ratner, you mentioned—

MICHAEL RATNER: Two things. I mean, we have worked hard on this on what the right of asylum is, and it's very clear that political speech, which is what a publisher and a journalist does as—with regard to WikiLeaks or other issues, when they're whistleblowers, when they're revealing government crimes or when they're revealing government misconduct and corruption, is protected under international free speech and is a grounds for asylum. So the Ecuadorean minister is on completely correct legal grounds here.

And on the second issue, I think it's clear that Julian Assange cannot get a fair trial in the United States. Not only are there calls for his lynching, essentially, where the vice president, Biden, has called him akin to a high-tech terrorist, but you understand what has happened to Bradley Manning the minute they got their hands on him in the United States—essentially an underground solitary prison, stripped. The U.N. rapporteur has called it cruel and inhuman treatment, akin to torture, and said it was likely torture. This is what Julian Assange would be facing. In addition, the Espionage Act itself is a political statute that is used to go after free speech. That's what it was—that's what it was designed for in the First World War. That's what it does. And that's why they want to get Julian Assange. They don't like his message. They want to kill the messenger. Rather than do that, they should be looking at their own crimes and going after the people who have committed crimes. So the Ecuadorean ambassador is absolutely—or the Ecuadorean minister, absolutely correct. He has a right to asylum under the refugee convention, and he will not get a fair trial in the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Foreign Affairs Minister Patiño is saying that Assange is a victim of political persecution. As the news conference goes on, we're going to wrap up with you now, right now, Michael Ratner, and we're going to come back to you in a few minutes, as the news conference ends and they make their announcement, which is reportedly that Julian Assange can remain in the London embassy, but they have not come to that point in the news conference.

The New York Times

has reported that from sources in Quito. And we'll get the latest on what exactly that means. We've been speaking with Michael Ratner, president emeritus of the Center for Constitutional Rights, legal adviser to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. We'll talk with them—with Michael again later in the broadcast, but now we're going to go to Phoenix after this break.