



US refuses to drop Assange hunt even after key witness admits to lies

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Aaron Maté: Welcome to Push Back, I'm Aaron Maté. The US continues to seek the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, even as a critical part of its case has fallen apart. In a new interview, the key witness for the U.S. extradition attempt has admitted that he fabricated critical parts of his testimony. Well, joining me now is the journalist who broke this story, Bjartmar Alexandersson is a reporter with the Icelandic newspaper Stundin. Bjatmar welcome to Push Back.

Bjartmar Alexandersson: Thank you.

AM: So tell us who this key witness is, Sigurdur Thordarson, and what he admitted to you.

BA: Well, that's a long story he has. Basically his name is [unintelligible], but he's actually changed it to Sigurdur Thordarson. But it was a common thing among criminals here in Iceland to change the names a little bit. He's born and is an Icelandic citizen, and he's also named "Siggi the Hacker". He's now known by that name also, although that name doesn't really fit since according to our investigation, he has actually no hacking skills, even the chat logs that we have in Stundin show that he's actually asking the FBI for assistance to get a video of a mobile phone. So he has not so much talent in that field. Well, Siggi is actually a former WikiLeaks volunteer. And he actually went to the US embassy on the twenty third of August of 2011 to become an FBI informant for the US government. So he actually alleged, according to the indictment and according to his testimony through the indictment, that Julian Assange did some hacking. And actually in the indictment, you can see how it tells that Julian and Siggi did things together. And the strange part about the indictment and what he tells me is that it doesn't fit. And we can go into these details later if you want to but this character is actually, has been charged and convicted for perpetrating against young boys down to 15 years old. And he's also a con artist here. He's actually been charged and convicted for embezzling funds from several companies and individuals here in Iceland and also from WikiLeaks, a total of fifty thousand United States dollars. Well, it didn't stop there. He was convicted in 2014 for these crimes, but his crime spree continued and specifically after he became an FBI informant and got an immunity agreement, his crime spree continued here in Iceland.

AM: All right, so when the British judge overseeing Assange's extradition ruled on the US effort to extradite him, the judge basically accepted all the allegations made against Assange and only ruled against the US on narrow medical grounds. So how critical was this supposed witness's testimony to the US indictment and also to the judge's ruling in basically accepting the US claims?

BA: Well, the judge is the only one who could actually comment on that. But according to legal experts who have spoken out regarding this issue, since I'm not a legal expert, they have said that this is critical to the US case. That they are trying to change Julian Assange from a journalist to a hacker. And that's quite significant because the Obama administration had the so-called The New York Times problem where they could not basically go after Julian Assange because they would then have to go after every other investigative journalist, which would have printed or published any government secrets. So the indictment needed a change and the Trump administration actually did that. They brought up the testimony of Siggi, which he had already given to the FBI back in 2011. So in 2019, they came back here to Iceland to interrogate Siggi and made him a witness. And a few months later, he was out in Washington, to sign an immunity agreement with the FBI. And here we have now, he's telling me these stories about what happened down with WikiLeaks and about these cases, that doesn't fit the indictment. It just doesn't fit.

AM: Right. So I know it's a long story, but what are the key claims that were attributed to him in the indictment that he is now recanting basically to you?

BA: Yeah, well, the first thing I saw, the difference between the indictment and also what he tells me, is that regarding the hacking of the phone conversations of members of the Icelandic parliament, well, there was no hacking because Siggi told me that he got a USB stick from a third party, which he then put into his computer and when I asked him if he took a look at them or listen to them, he said he did not. I asked him if he could confirm that these were actually audio files. He could not confirm that either. He said that he never checked these files, that he just gave them directly to Assange. So that doesn't make sense in case of the indictment. So what he's telling me is completely different from the indictment. The second thing is also that Assange is being charged of using an account from the search and rescue teams to be able to follow the police vehicles here in Iceland. Well, actually, Siggi told me that this account was his, since he was in the search and rescue. So they didn't hack any accounts. Siggi just gave Assange the account and there's no, from all the evidence that we have, that shows that he actually used this account. So there was no hacking there. Thirdly, it's about the Landsbankinn documents. It's basically a bank in Iceland, called Landsbankinn and after the financial collapse here in 2008, where basically all banks went down, it was a big story to get to know for every journalist in Iceland, who the bank was loaning money to. And eventually we knew that they were loaning money to their owners. But this Landsbankinn document was actually in circulation months before Siggi even got it. Many Icelandic journalists had this, but it was decrypted. So there was no hacking of any banking documents either. So it's just these indictment cases that don't make sense.

AM: And you obtain some chat logs that Siggi provided to you that give us a window into his actual role in WikiLeaks or in reality lack thereof, because it's been suggested that he played- he was some critical figure, but really, the chat logs reveal that that is a farce and other key details about whether or not WikiLeaks was even aware of his activities. Can you

talk about what these chat logs were and what they revealed?

BA: Yeah, I mean, actually, Siggi gave us a lot of information, including chat logs. And you can see there where he is basically lying about his position. He tells people that he's basically the second in command, that he's the PR manager for WikiLeaks, that he's in charge of all WikiLeaks volunteers and so on and so on. But his role was just a volunteer and a limited role. He was at their side in England. He went there and everything. But a lot of volunteers did that also. But his work was limited. But how he spoke to other individuals online shows that he was actually a little bit inflaming his situation, just a tiny bit. And he even used this in the chat logs that we have, where he's speaking to several of his victims in the sexual assault cases. Well, he actually is speaking to the victims and telling them how big he is inside the WikiLeaks. So it's everywhere where he is just inflaming his situation and thinks that he is the main man of WikiLeaks. And even when he's speaking to Sabu or Kayla, which were members of the LulzSec hacking group, I mean, there's no indication that anybody else is speaking to these people or having any sort of a conversation about hacking. So he's the only character who's actually asking people to attack institutions here in Iceland and try to get some information from institutions here in Iceland. And that's also in the indictment that they were actually trying to get some information from the parliament and so on. The only individual who was trying to get it was actually Siggi. And when I asked him if Julian Assange ever asked him to ask these hackers to attack these government institutions here in Iceland or trying to get some documents he said, no, he never asked me.

AM: And this hacker, Sabu, who you mentioned, he turned out to be an FBI informant...

BA: Exactly, on the 6th of June, Sabu was actually arrested by the FBI and became an FBI informant. And there's actually a funny conversation between Sabu and Siggi, which we have, where they're trying to, after Siggi became an FBI informant also, where they're both trying to entrap one another as both FBI informants. They don't know that they're both working for the FBI. So it's really funny to see the conversation, how they're trying to trap one another. But yes, Sabu was an FBI informant even when the LulzSec group was attacking and making DoS ([Denial of Service](#)) attacks on Icelandic institutions. So they were doing these cyber attacks under the watchful eye of the FBI. And then later, a few months after that, the FBI came to Iceland and said, well, we need to help you guys out here and investigate something in the country because we believe that hackers, who are working for WikiLeaks, are actually planning an attack. And there was no attack, because Siggi was the only guy who was asking Sabu or Kayla or LulzSec members to attack any institutions here in Iceland.

AM: So when the US came to Iceland to do that, that was just their way of using that as an excuse to go after Assange.

BA: Exactly. The thing is that, we have, actually, you have to get a legal permission from the minister of justice here in Iceland for any foreign police institution, like the FBI, to be able to work here. And they apply for a work, basically to be able to work for any police job here. They actually said that they were going to help out the Icelandic government to stop a cyber attack, when indeed they were only here to investigate WikiLeaks and Julian Assange and interrogate "Siggi the Hacker". So they basically lied and our former minister of interior actually kicked them out of the country, when he figured this out.

AM: Have any major US media outlets contacted you about your scoop?

BA: Well, not US outlets no, but we have been working with several European outlets and I have to say this, that this takes time. This is a 10 year story. There's a lot of documentation. I mean, we have around 12 to 20 thousand documents that we went over and we haven't even gone over everything, because we're still working on this. But there have been several big media corporations who have contacted us from Europe.

AM: Right, but the US right now is overseeing the persecution of Assange, it's seeking its extradition, and I've just been struck by the fact that your revelation, your scoop, that a key witness in the Assange case fabricated key parts of his testimony, it's gotten, to my knowledge, no mainstream coverage in the US.

BA: No, not much, I can't say so, but, you know, for a little bit of defense for my colleagues, I mean, this is a tough story and I believe that in the next few weeks, this story will be broken in the US. I don't think they are stopping this. I don't think they're not doing it because of some mainstream media outlet. I don't believe that. This takes time. And for them to look at a small newspaper in Iceland and just take their word for it, I would not even do it myself, an investigative journalist. I would have to double check everything, work with the paper and everything and so on. And that's what we're doing with a lot of big European companies or media outlets in Europe. They're the first ones who have started this.

AM: And how about the fallout in Iceland? Has there been any reaction to new revelations that the US basically fooled Icelandic officials in their efforts to persecute Assange?

BA: Well, a little bit, not much. But, I mean, we knew that they were fooling us back in 2013, when the minister of interior said so. That this was based on a lie. And in the Icelandic article of "Siggi the Hacker", there's actually an interview, which we will now translate, put out English subtitles, as soon as we get to that- where he states that this was just, there's no evidence that this was happening, what the FBI was telling us. And the funny thing also is that in the US indictment, all these crimes are supposed to have happened in Iceland. But the problem is, there was never a Icelandic police investigation of any of these crimes. So it's really strange to think that the US are actually trying to get a man convicted for some crimes that happened in Iceland and that the local police are not and have never investigated.

AM: And in the aftermath of your story, the Biden administration continues to press forward with its extradition attempt. There was just this submission to the UK court where the US said that if Assange is convicted he can serve out his term in Australia. Assange's partner, Stella Moris, pointed out that whether that is true or not, the US could delay this case for years and years and years, making the issue of his ultimate sentence an issue far in the future, possibly a decade or so or longer from now. And they're also saying that they're promising that he won't be subjected to imprisonment in a supermax prison. But again, there are ways out of that as well. What is your reaction to the US continuing to press forward with this extradition attempt, even after you've just shown that their key witness fabricated key parts of his testimony?

BA: I mean, well, I can only comment on what I have read. And as you said in The New York Times actually published an article telling this, that they are planning to be giving him

the chance to take out his sentence in Australia. I don't know what the US are planning here. I mean, this is something new. I mean, we just got the news from England that the US will be able to take up the case again in the English courts, but they only can take up three out of the five cases that they wanted to do. So I mean, only, I think, the courts can answer this question eventually. Legal experts have pointed out that this is kind of a move from the DOJ, the Department of Justice in the US, kind of a desperate move. Some have said that- it is not my opinion- but it's, I think we just have to wait and see what will happen regarding the appeal that the US can now make on the case in England.

AM: Any final words for us, what you're working on next in this story and what you're looking towards in the case of Julian Assange in the coming weeks?

BA: Well, first of all, we want to know how badly the FBI tricked the Icelandic authorities. We want to know exactly what happened, how they gained access to the country on this false cyberattack warning, and how actually the Icelandic government has been working with the FBI on this Julian Assange case. Because here in Iceland actually, the prime minister actually was trying to put a law through the parliament here to protect whistleblowers. So we really want to know why the Icelandic government would be working with the US government on something that we do not agree on. We cannot forget that the leaks, which came from WikiLeaks in 2010 and 2011, that all major news outlets published in the world were about US war crimes. We would not have known about what was actually happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. We would not have known that the US military actually killed journalists. So we would not have known all about all these things in Guantanamo Bay and so much information that the US government was hiding from the world and specifically their own citizens on what they were doing in a war zone. So, you know, again, I don't know where this case will end. We will try to track it down as much as we can. We will try to get everything from our Icelandic story back to English, because there's a lot of information we have to translate. But we will try to do our best and get some audio tapes from the interview online and also the interview with the former interior minister, who was at the time working with the FBI, and try to get as much information to the foreign media. And again, I can understand a little bit why my colleagues in the United States are taking their time, because this is a big case and you have to get it completely right, because we have seen some news, which has now gone out, which is not completely right. And for example, in a few media outlets, and it's based on an old story from Wired, it says that Siggi got paid five thousand dollars from the FBI for becoming an informant, from some information he gave them, some hard drives. Well, that's absolutely untrue. The FBI only paid for travel expenses for Siggi to come to be able to be interviewed. So we just want the story to be, always be, one hundred percent correct and no mistakes will be made in that.

AM: Bjartmar Alexandersson, congratulations on this scoop. It's an incredible feat of reporting, and I do hope that it does reach an even wider audience in the coming weeks because it truly is historic, I think, what you've uncovered. Bjartmar Alexandersson a reporter with the Icelandic newspaper Stundin. Thank you very much.

BA: Thank you.

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