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Assange handed Sydney peace medal

<http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/assange-handed-sydney-peace-medal-20110511-1eic2.html>

The Sydney Peace Foundation has accused the federal government of "demonising" Queensland-born WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange as it handed him its highest award.

The peace foundation presented Mr Assange a gold medal in recognition of his "exceptional courage in pursuit of human rights" at a ceremony in London on Tuesday.

It is only the fourth time in the organisation's 14-year history that the prize for extraordinary achievement in promoting peace with justice has been given out.

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Foundation director Professor Stuart Rees said the award was to honour Mr Assange's work in challenging official secrecy.

But he accused the Australian government of demonising Mr Assange and aiding US efforts to behave like a totalitarian state.

"By challenging centuries-old practices of government secrecy and by championing people's right to know, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange have created the potential for a new order in journalism and in the free flow of information," Prof Rees said in a statement.

"Instead of demonising an Australian citizen who has broken no law, the Australian government must stop shoring up Washington's efforts to behave like a totalitarian state."

The federal government has previously said the release by WikiLeaks of thousands of diplomatic cables and previously classified military documents may have involved criminality.

However, no charges have been brought against Assange regarding WikiLeaks' activities.

Bradley Manning, the US Army private accused of giving information to WikiLeaks, remains in jail awaiting trial on about two dozen charges, including aiding the enemy.

Mr Assange, who was named as the award recipient in February, welcomed the prize.

"The real value of this award, and the Sydney Peace Foundation, is that it makes explicit the link between peace and justice," he said in a statement.

"It does not take the safe, feel-good option of shunning controversy by uttering platitudes.

"Instead it goes into difficult terrain by identifying organisations and individuals who are directly engaged in struggles of one kind or another."

Mr Assange, who was arrested in London at Sweden's request in December, remains on bail pending his challenge in July to a British judge's decision to extradite him over allegations of sexual assault.

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