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Sutyagin, Freed in Spy Swap, Yearns for Home

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Sutyagin listening to his verdict in a Moscow courtroom April 7, 2004.

Igor Sutyagin, an arms control researcher convicted of spying for the West who was released from prison and flown to Britain as part of a spy swap, said Friday that he was yearning to return home.

Sutyagin has been granted a six-month work visa by Britain, but he told Ekho Moskvy radio in a telephone interview from London that he did not intend to stay.

Sutyagin has spoken in recent days for the first time since he was delivered, still in Russian prison attire, to a British military base in rural Oxfordshire in early July. He said he was staying with friends in London and was talking to relatives about future employment in Russia.

"It's my country. I am not on the run," he said, adding that Russian officials have vowed not to hinder his homecoming.

He and three others convicted of betraying Moscow to the West were pardoned and exchanged in the largest spy swap since the Cold War for 10 Russian agents who had infiltrated suburbs of the United States.

Sutyagin was a military analyst with the U.S.A. and Canada Institute, a respected Moscow-based think tank, before he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2004 on charges of passing information about nuclear submarines and other weapons to a British company that Russian investigators claimed was a CIA cover. Sutyagin has insisted on his innocence, saying the information he provided was available from open sources.

For President Dmitry Medvedev's pardon, Sutyagin was required to sign a confession, something he said he initially declined to do. But he reconsidered after speaking with U.S. and Russian officials who told him the release of others depended on his cooperation, he said.

Sutyagin said in Friday's interview that he was fatigued and longed to be among his friends and relatives in Russia to make up for lost time.

"I need to return. Eleven years have been lost. I need to get moving," he said, casting off warnings that he said he had received from acquaintances in Russia not to return and risk renewed trouble with the authorities.

In the meantime, relatives are applying for passports to fly to see him, he said, but have been told that the processing period would take longer than expected. He suggested that the holdup might be linked to interviews he had given since arriving in Britain, but did not go into any greater detail. Sutyagin in recent days has also given interviews to the Moscow-based opposition New Times weekly and The New York Times.

Of the four convicts pardoned and flown out of Russia, two — Sutyagin and Sergei Skripal, a former colonel in Russian military intelligence who was found guilty of passing state secrets to Britain and sentenced to 13 years in prison in 2006 — were sent to Britain. The others — Alexander Zaporozhsky, a former colonel in the Foreign Intelligence Service, sentenced in 2003 to 18 years, and Gennady Vasilenko, a former KGB officer sentenced to three years in prison on murky charges of illegal weapons possession — flew to the United States.

It remains unclear why the two were sent to Britain, although the country figured in both their cases.

"Honestly, I don't know. No one has explained it," Sutyagin said, adding that he welcomed the destination all the same for its relative proximity to Russia.

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