

Russia Starts Freeing Captive Belugas From 'Whale Prison,' Reports Say

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Yuri Smityuk / TASS

Russia has started releasing a group of captive whales whose detention in Russia's Far East has caused an international outcry, state media said on Thursday.

Nearly 100 whales reportedly bound for export to China have been held for months in cramped pens near the Sea of Japan port of Nakhodka, [triggering](#) a wave of international and domestic criticism. Russian officials in April [signed](#) an agreement with a group of international scientists to release the captive orcas and belugas.

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Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Gordeyev said the whales would be taken back to where they were caught and released within four months.

"We have taken the only sensible decision at the recommendation of scientists to rebase the

animals in their natural habitat where they were caught, to their familiar environment," the minister said.

"This operation will take about four months," Gordeyev, who was speaking at President Vladimir Putin's annual question and answer session, said.

The All-Russian Research Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography (VNIRO) has loaded two orcas and six belugas onto trucks equipped with water tanks, [Interfax reported](#) Thursday.

The two orcas will be transported first, traveling about 1,800 kilometers north to their original habitat in the Sea of Okhotsk, a source familiar with the whales' release [told](#) the state-run TASS news agency. The journey by ground and water transport will take about six days, the source added.

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A team of about 70 people, including scientists, veterinarians and other personnel, will accompany the whales on their journey, TASS reported. Scientists will attach satellite tags to the whales to track their activity following their release.

French oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau, who led a team of international scientists to examine the whales' condition this spring, had [submitted](#) a request to release the whales to Putin's question and answer session.

The "whale prison" first made headlines last fall after activists [raised](#) the alarm about the mistreatment of 11 killer whales and 90 belugas that they said were kept in cold and cramped pens.

Their plight sparked condemnation from animal rights groups and spurred a petition, shared by actor Leonardo DiCaprio on social media, which gathered almost 1.5 million signatures online.

Russian authorities in late February ordered the whales to be released after President Vladimir Putin pledged to personally step in to handle the matter, but [concerns](#) over how to safely introduce the mammals back into the wild prevented their immediate release.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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