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Putin Backs Prisoner Swap With U.S. Ahead of Biden Summit

By AFP

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Paul Whelan **Yuri Kochetkov / EPA / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin has renewed an offer to swap prisoners ahead of his first summit Wednesday with Joe Biden, who has come under growing pressure to free Americans in Russian jails.

Biden, who has vowed a clear-eyed, tougher approach with Putin than his predecessors at the start of their terms, has already made clear that he will raise the fate of jailed Americans when he meets the Russian leader in Geneva.

The most prominent U.S. citizens in Russian custody are Paul Whelan, a former security official at an auto parts company who was arrested in December 2018 on charges of espionage, and Trevor Reed, who was arrested in 2019 for a drunken brawl in which he punched two Russian police officers.

Asked in an interview with NBC News broadcast Monday if he was willing to negotiate with Biden on a prisoner swap, Putin said, "Yes, of course" and called for a broader extradition agreement.

Putin said that some cases were "matters of a humanitarian nature."

"Why not discuss them as long as they pertain to the health and life of specific individuals and of their families? Of course. Sure thing," he said.

Putin hinted that Reed's case could be resolved quickly, calling him a "drunk and a troublemaker."

"These things happen in life. There is nothing horrible about it. It happens to our men as well," Putin said.

"What would have happened if he'd fought a cop, if he'd hit a cop in your country? He would have been shot dead on that spot, and that's the end of it. Isn't that the case?"

Russians captured by U.S.

Putin specifically raised the prospect of a swap for contract pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, saying he was also accused of "common crime" and that he has "major health issues" ignored by prison authorities.

Yaroshenko was convicted in 2011 of smuggling drugs into the United States. He was extradited from Liberia in what the Kremlin denounced as a kidnapping.

Other high-profile Russians in US custody include Viktor Bout, the prolific arms dealer arrested in Thailand in 2010 who inspired the Nicolas Cage film "Lord of War."

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He is serving a 25-year sentence on charges of smuggling weapons to Colombia's FARC rebels.

Biden has vowed to raise pressure on Russia for harboring cybercriminals who have been blamed in major attacks on a US oil pipeline and a meat supplier.

Asked at the G7 summit in England about a prisoner exchange involving hackers, Biden said, "I'm committed to holding him accountable."

Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, later clarified that the United States was not considering a swap including any hackers.

"He's not saying he's going to be exchanging cyber criminals with Russia," Sullivan told reporters.

Hopes rise in U.S.

U.S. lawmakers across party lines have pushed Biden to put the release of Americans high on

the agenda with Putin.

"The Kremlin's Kafkaesque treatment of American citizens must stop and President Biden should make their return a priority of the visit," Senator Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said last week.

Reed's parents, in a separate interview with NBC News, said their son denies the charges against him and that the judge ignored video evidence — but she voiced hope for a swap.

"We're very happy to hear that President Putin is open to a prisoner exchange and we hope that that's something that happens very soon because Trevor and Paul Whelan both have been there long enough considering that they're innocent," she said.

Whelan, in a telephone interview earlier this month with CNN, also insisted on his innocence and voiced hope that "either an exchange or some sort of resolution" would come about soon.

"So I would ask President Biden to aggressively discuss and resolve this issue with his Russian counterparts," Whelan said from a Russian prison.

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