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Russia Says Holding U.S. Olympic Basketball Champion on Drugs Charge

By AFP

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Griner has played for UMMC Ekaterinburg during the WNBA offseason since 2015. **УГМК / Wikimedia Commons**

U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and WNBA champion, has been detained in Moscow on charges of carrying vape cartridges that contained cannabis oil in her luggage.

A statement on Saturday from the Russian Federal Customs Service announcing her arrest came as tensions between Moscow and the West have soared over Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

It wasn't clear exactly how long Griner had been in custody, with the customs service saying only that the arrest occurred "in February."

According to the statement, an inspection of hand luggage carried by a U.S. citizen who

arrived on a flight from New York "confirmed the presence of 'vapes' (and) a liquid with a specific smell."

It said an expert had determined that the liquid was the narcotic cannabis oil (hashish oil) and said the charges carry a potential jail term of five to 10 years.

The statement did not identify the jailed woman but said she was a two-time Olympic basketball champion for the United States and a player in the WNBA.

The customs service also released a video on Saturday in which airport security services are seen going through the luggage of a passenger who appears to be Griner.

USA Basketball, which oversees the Olympic teams, said on Twitter that it was "aware of and closely monitoring the legal situation facing Brittney Griner in Russia."

It added: "Brittney has always handled herself with the utmost professionalism during her long tenure with USA Basketball and her safety and well-being are our primary concerns."

Griner's agent, Lindsay Kagawa Colas of Wasserman Group, said in a statement issued to U.S. media that the agency was in contact with Griner.

"We are aware of the situation with Brittney Griner in Russia and are in close contact with her, her legal representation in Russia, her family, her teams, and the WNBA and NBA," she said.

"As this is an ongoing legal matter, we are not able to comment further on the specifics of her case but can confirm that as we work to get her home, her mental and physical health remain our primary concern."

Griner, 31, led the Phoenix Mercury to the franchise's third WNBA title in 2014 and a surprise return to the WNBA finals in October.

The 6-foot-9 (2.06m) center has played for UMMC Ekaterinburg during the WNBA offseason since 2015, helping the club to three Russian domestic titles and EuroLeague Women championships in 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2021.

Griner is among a majority of the 144 players on WNBA rosters who have played overseas in the North American league's offseason.

Earnings at European clubs can far outstrip what players make in the United States. Griner has reportedly made as much as $1 million a year with UMMC, while the WNBA maximum is about $228,000.

A WNBA spokeswoman told the New York Times on Saturday that all WNBA players apart from Griner had left Russia and Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion of the neighboring country.

The Mercury, the WNBA and the WNBA Players Association all issued statements supporting Griner, the WNBA saying she had the league's full support and our main priority is her swift and safe return to the United States."

The Mercury added: "We love and support Brittney, and at this time our main concern is her safety, physical and mental health, and her safe return home."

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