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U.S. Says Basketball Star 'Wrongfully Detained' in Russia

By AFP

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Brittney Griner. **Lorie Shaull (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

The United States said Tuesday that Russia has unjustly detained basketball star Brittney Griner, a finding that steps up efforts to free her more than two months after she was seized in Moscow.

"The Department of State has determined that the Russian Federation has wrongfully detained U.S. citizen Brittney Griner," a State Department spokesperson said.

Calling American citizens' safety "among the highest priorities of the U.S. government," the spokesperson said the State Department would "provide appropriate support" to Griner.

Griner, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and WNBA champion, was detained at Moscow's airport on February 17 on charges of carrying in her luggage vape cartridges with cannabis oil, which is illegal in Russia.

Washington had earlier been granted consular access but had stopped short of commenting on the nature of her detention.

The finding comes nearly a week after the United States and Russia exchanged prisoners, a scene reminiscent of the Cold War amid soaring tensions over Moscow's invasion in Ukraine.

Russia in the last exchange freed Trevor Reed, a former U.S. Marine accused of drunkenly fighting with police.

The United States also says that Russia has unjustly detained Paul Whelan, a former security official at a vehicle parts company who was sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges.

Griner, 31, is considered among the greatest female basketball players with her skill at "dunking" a ball.

She was playing club basketball in Russia before the resumption of the U.S. season, a common practice for players seeking additional income.

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