

Russian Court Sentences U.S. Basketball Star Griner to 9 Years in Jail

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Brittney Griner at a court hearing **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

A Russian court on Thursday found U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner guilty of smuggling and storing drugs and sentenced her to nine years in prison.

Griner will spend a "total of nine years in a Russian penal colony," judge Anna Sotnikova told the court, adding that the 31-year-old athlete will also have to pay a fine of 1 million rubles (\$16,590).

Griner's defense team said it will appeal the verdict.

"The court completely ignored all the evidence of the defense, and most importantly, the guilty plea," the defense team said in a statement.

"The verdict is absolutely unreasonable. We will certainly file an appeal."

The two-time Olympic champion was arrested on drug smuggling charges on Feb. 17 after officers found cannabis vape cartridges in her luggage at a Moscow airport, putting her at the

center of the diplomatic fallout between Russia and the United States over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

While Griner, 31, pleaded guilty to the charges last month in hopes of receiving a more lenient sentence, the prosecution's demand nears the maximum punishment of 10 years in prison.

Prosecutor Nikolay Vlasenko said Griner "deliberately" proceeded through the green corridor at customs and stated she had nothing to declare "in order to conceal" the substance.

Griner walked into the courtroom in handcuffs, escorted by several law enforcement officers and a police dog.

Standing inside a cage for defendants before the start of the hearing, she held up a photo of herself with teammates from the Russian club she plays for.

Her lawyer Maria Blagovolina told the court Griner was "an icon for many people" and "was brave" to admit her guilt.

She added that the amount of substance brought in by the athlete was "just over" the allowed amount.

Blagovolina asked the court to acquit Griner or consider a more lenient sentence if she is found guilty.

"I would ask the court to acquit my client, but if the court finds it impossible, then I consider it necessary to choose a punishment while taking into account Griner's personality and the role she played in the development of Russian basketball," Interfax [quoted](#) Blagovolina as saying.

Griner echoed her lawyer's plea in her final statement, calling her actions "an honest mistake" and saying that she too hopes for a lenient decision that won't dramatically alter the course of her life.

"I know everybody keeps talking about political pawn and politics but I hope this is far from this courtroom," journalist Mary Ilyushina [quoted](#) Griner as saying.

Related article: [U.S. Basketball Star Griner Says Didn't Intend to Smuggle Drugs Into Russia](#)

Griner's lawyers say that the basketball star had been authorized to use marijuana for medical purposes. Marijuana for both recreational and medicinal uses is illegal in Russia.

In previous hearings, Griner said she was regularly tested by U.S., Russian and European leagues.

The WNBA star said she had permission from a U.S. doctor to use medicinal cannabis to relieve pain from her many injuries — "from spine to cartilages."

She had been in Russia to play club basketball for UMMC Yekaterinburg during the WNBA off-season, a common path for American players looking to supplement their income.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, which classifies Griner as "wrongfully detained," has proposed a prisoner swap with Russia in which the basketball player and imprisoned former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan would be released.

Several reports have said Washington offered up notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to Moscow.

Biden on Thursday called a Russian court's sentencing of Griner "unacceptable" and reiterated that he would "work tirelessly and pursue every possible avenue" to repatriate her and Whelan.

"Russia is wrongfully detaining Brittney. It's unacceptable and I call on Russia to release her immediately so she can be with her wife, loved ones, friends and teammates," Biden said in a statement.

AFP contributed reporting.

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