

# Russia, U.S. in Talks Over 'Merchant of Death' for Griner – Moscow

By [AFP](#)

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A Russian court sentences WNBA player Brittney Griner to nine years in prison. **TASS**

The U.S. and Russia are discussing a prisoner exchange that would involve trading a notorious Russian arms trafficker for an American basketball star, a Russian diplomat said Saturday.

It marked the first time that Russia has said the talks concerned exchanging Viktor Bout, known as the "Merchant of Death," for two-time Olympian Brittney Griner.

"The discussions on the very sensitive topic of an exchange are proceeding via the channels chosen by our presidents," Alexander Datchiev, the head the North America department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, was quoted as saying by state news agency TASS.

"Silent diplomacy continues and should bear fruit if Washington, of course, is careful not to fall into propaganda," he said.

Griner was arrested at a Moscow airport in February for possessing vape cartridges with a

small amount of cannabis oil.

The 31-year-old, who was in Russia to play for the professional Yekaterinburg team during her off-season from the Phoenix Mercury, was charged with smuggling narcotics and sentenced to nine years in prison earlier this month.

Bout was arrested in Thailand in 2008 and then extradited to the U.S., where in 2012 he was sentenced to 25 years in prison on charges of arming rebels in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts.

He inspired the 2005 arms smuggling movie "Lord of War" starring Nicolas Cage and was dubbed the "Merchant of Death" by former British minister Peter Hain for supplying weapons to war-torn Angola and Liberia.

Russia has long sought his release.

Last weekend Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations who has negotiated the release of several American citizens held in other countries, said he was "optimistic" about efforts to negotiate a "two for two" prisoner swap with Russia.

"I think she's going to be freed, I think she has the right strategy of contrition, there's going to be a prisoner swap — though I think it will be two for two, involving Paul Whelan," he told ABC's "This Week," insisting that he was only a "catalyst" in negotiations.

Whelan is a former U.S. Marine who was convicted of espionage in June 2020 and sentenced to 16 years in prison. He has maintained his innocence.

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