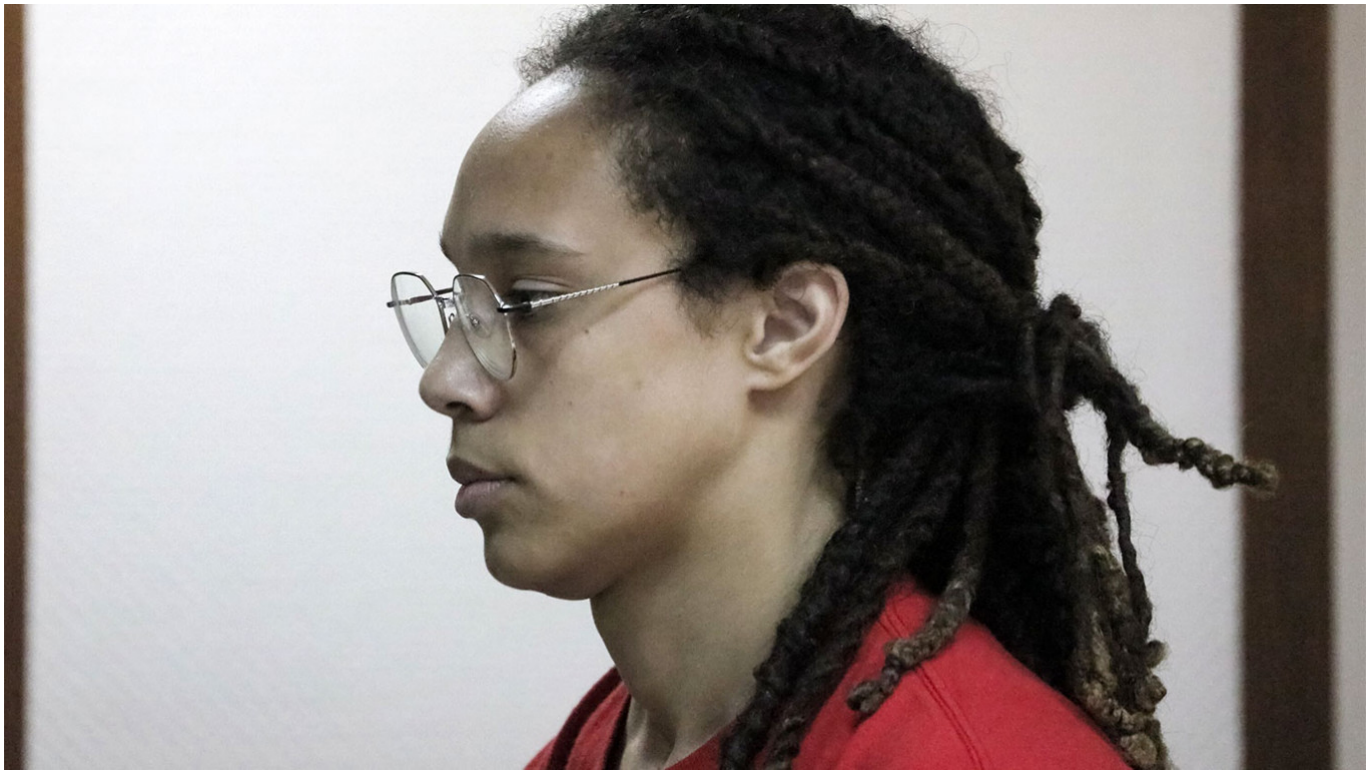
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U.S. Basketball Star Griner Appeals Drug Conviction in Russia

By AFP

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U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner, who was found guilty of drug possession and trafficking in Russia, has appealed her nine-year jail sentence, her lawyers said Monday.

The two-time Olympic basketball gold medalist and Women's NBA champion was arrested at a Moscow airport in February for possessing vape cartridges with a small amount of cannabis oil.

"Brittney Griner's defense team filed an appeal for the verdict," her legal team said on the messenger Telegram.

The date of the appeal hearing is yet to be set.

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 was

sentenced to nine years in a penal colony in early August.

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Griner pleaded guilty to the charges, but said she did not intend to use the banned substance in Russia.

Since her arrest, Moscow and Washington have been in talks about a potential prisoner exchange despite tensions soaring over Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.

The White House said it put forward a deal for the exchange of Griner and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, who is serving 16 years in Russia on espionage charges.

On Saturday, Moscow indicated that it was seeking the release of notorious arms trafficker Viktor Bout.

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.

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