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U.S. Hostage Negotiator Travels to Russia – Reports

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Bill Richardson has negotiated the release of several American citizens held in other countries. **AP / TASS**

A former U.S. ambassador to the UN who has negotiated the release of several American citizens held in other countries traveled to Russia this week as Washington continues to push for the release of two jailed Americans in high-profile cases, CNN reported Tuesday without naming its source.

Bill Richardson held meetings with unidentified Russian leaders in Moscow, according to the Associated Press, which cited an unnamed person familiar with the matter.

No other details on Richardson's unannounced trip have been disclosed.

If confirmed, the talks would be among the first face-to-face U.S.-Russian negotiations since the Kremlin's forces invaded Ukraine in February.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Wednesday that "there

were no meetings at the Kremlin" when asked to comment about Richardson's reported trip.

CNN quoted a senior Biden administration official saying that any person traveling to Russia "is going as a private citizen and they don't speak for the U.S government."

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Russian diplomats have confirmed that "silent diplomacy" was underway with the U.S. on a potential exchange of prisoners held in both countries.

The U.S. is pressing for the release of WNBA star Brittney Griner, who was last month sentenced to nine years in Russian prison on drug smuggling charges, and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, convicted of espionage in June 2020 and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

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

Washington classifies both Griner and Whelan as wrongfully detained, meaning the U.S. government is involved in efforts to secure their release.

Moscow indicated that it was seeking the release of notorious arms trafficker Viktor Bout, who was in 2012 sentenced to 25 years in U.S. prison on charges of arming rebels in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts.

Richardson said in August he was "optimistic" about efforts to negotiate a "two for two" prisoner swap with Russia.

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