The Moscow Times
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Frees U.S. Basketball Star Brittney Griner in Prisoner Swap

December 08, 2022



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

Russia and the United States have exchanged the U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner for notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, U.S. and Russian officials said Thursday.

The WNBA star, who was serving a nine-year prison sentence in a Russian jail on drug charges, was released on Thursday in a one-for-one swap for Bout, an arms dealer who has been in a U.S. prison for the past 12 years.

The exchange was approved by U.S. President Joe Biden last week and took place early on Thursday in the United Arab Emirates, CBS news reported.

Biden spoke with Griner on Thursday morning as the 32-year-old began her journey to the United States.

"She is safe. She is on a plane. She is on her way home," Biden later tweeted alongside photos of himself in the Oval Office with Griner's wife Cherelle.

Saying that Griner would need time to recover from the "needless trauma" of her imprisonment in Russia, Biden nevertheless remarked that she was "in good spirits."

"She deserves space, privacy and time with her loved ones to recover and heal from her time being wrongfully detained," he added.

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> #Griner #Bout swap pic.twitter.com/6UFjIn51G4
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> — Maxim A. Suchkov (@m_suchkov) December 8, 2022

Griner was handed a nine-year sentence in August after customs officers at a Moscow airport found vape cartridges containing a small quantity of cannabis oil in her luggage in February.

While she pleaded guilty to the charges, Griner maintained she had no idea the vape cartridges were illegal in Russia.

Washington said that it had been working hard behind the scenes to secure Griner's release, but that the case became mired in the heightened tensions between Russia and the United States over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Griner was being held at the notorious IK-2 penal colony in the region of Mordovia, some 480 kilometers east of Moscow, a prison known for its poor conditions and harsh treatment of inmates.

Bout, whose gun running and murky dealings with warlords landed him the title the "merchant of death," landed at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport on Thursday evening, Russian state television reported.

Biden also confirmed that despite Griner's release, the other high-profile U.S. citizen jailed in Russia, Paul Whelan, remains detained.

"We have not yet succeeded in securing Paul's release," Biden said of the former U.S. marine who was arrested in 2018 and accused of spying while visiting Moscow for a wedding, adding that his administration was "not giving up, we will never give up."

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