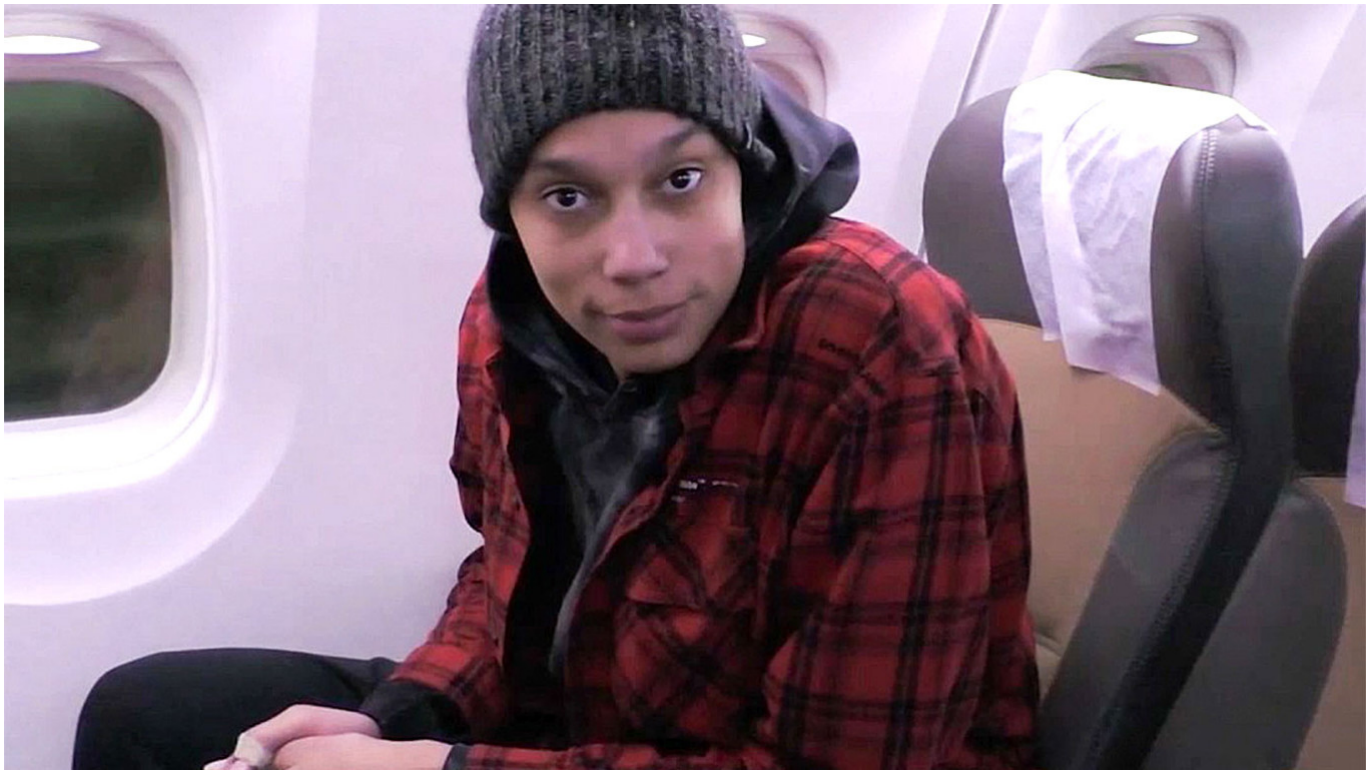
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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U.S. Basketball Star Griner Back Home After Russia Prisoner Swap

By Cecile Clocheret for AFP

December 09, 2022



U.S. basketball player Brittney Griner on a plane ahead of departing for the United States. **FSB / TASS**

American basketball star Brittney Griner arrived in the United States Friday morning after being released from a Russian prison in exchange for an arms dealer known as the "Merchant of Death."

Griner, 32, who was arrested in Russia in February on drug charges, was seen by an AFP reporter walking across a runway after her plane landed in San Antonio, Texas.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said told NBC that Griner "was in very, very good spirits when she got off the plane and appeared to be obviously in good health."

Griner will now be taken to a nearby military facility for medical checks to make sure she has "all the access she needs to health care workers just to make sure that she is OK," Kirby said.

Griner was exchanged in Abu Dhabi on Thursday for Viktor Bout, a 55-year-old Russian

national who was serving a 25-year sentence in a U.S. prison.

In footage released by Russian state media, Griner, shorn of her distinctive dreadlocks, and a relaxed and animated Bout crossed paths on the airport tarmac and headed towards the planes that would take them home.

Embed:

> Russian state media video, verified by The New York Times, shows the prisoner exchange of Brittney Griner and Viktor Bout, the convicted Russian arms dealer known as “the Merchant of Death,” at an airport in the United Arab Emirates. https://t.co/sw6OPSRgrI pic.twitter.com/QTAYQUZDk8
>
> — The New York Times (@nytimes) December 9, 2022

President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he had spoken to Griner and that she sounded well after suffering "needless trauma."

Putin says 'compromises' found

Griner, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, WNBA champion and LGBTQ trailblazer, was arrested at a Moscow airport against a backdrop of soaring tensions over Ukraine.

She was accused of possessing vape cartridges with a small quantity of cannabis oil and sentenced in August to nine years in prison.

Bout, who was accused of arming rebels in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts, was detained in a U.S. sting operation in Thailand in 2008, extradited to the United States and sentenced in 2012 to 25 years behind bars.

He landed in Russia on Thursday, state television said. "Don't worry, everything is OK, I love you very much," he told his mother Raisa.

While Griner's family and friends celebrated her release, another American held in Russia, former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, detained since 2018 and accused of spying, was not part of Thursday's exchange.

Kirby said the United States continued working with Moscow to bring Whelan home.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday that other prisoner swaps with Washington were possible.

"This is the result of negotiations and the search for compromises. In this case, compromises were found and we aren't refusing to continue this work in the future," Putin told reporters during a press conference in Kyrgyzstan.

'Joy and relief'

Biden announced Griner's release on Thursday flanked by her wife, Cherelle Griner, Vice President Kamala Harris and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

WNBA commissioner Cathy Engelbert said there was a "collective wave of joy and relief" in the women's professional league where Griner has been a star for a decade with the Phoenix Mercury.

Biden thanked the United Arab Emirates for helping "facilitate" Griner's release and the UAE issued a joint statement with Saudi Arabia saying it was the result of "mediation efforts" by leaders of the two Arab nations.

Related article: In Photos: Basketball Star Griner Exchanged for Arms Dealer Bout in U.S.-Russia Prisoner Swap

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said, however, that "the only countries that negotiated this deal were the United States and Russia."

At the time of her arrest, Griner had been playing for a professional team in Russia, as a number of WNBA players do in the off-season.

She pleaded guilty to the charges against her, but said she did not intend to break the law or use the banned substance in Russia.

Griner testified that she had permission from a U.S. doctor to use medicinal cannabis to relieve pain from her many injuries.

The use of medical marijuana is not allowed in Russia.

The 2005 film "Lord of War" starring Nicolas Cage was based in part on Bout's arms trafficking, and he has been the subject of several books and TV shows.

Speaking on MSNBC Friday morning, Kirby acknowledged concerns that after his release Bout could return to criminal activity.

"We're going to make sure now that he's a free man that we're looking after our national security interests and we're as vigilant as we can be," Kirby said.

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told the Izvestia newspaper on Friday that ties with Washington "continue to remain in a sad state."

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