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Ex-U.S. Marine Says He Feels Abandoned in Russian Prison

By AFP

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Paul Whelan. **Yuri Kochetkov / EPA / TASS**

Former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan says he feels "abandoned" and betrayed by his country after being imprisoned in Russia on espionage charges, the BBC said in an interview published Wednesday.

Whelan, 53, has been behind bars since 2018 and is serving a 16-year sentence for spying, a charge the U.S. government says is without merit.

He is currently in a prison in Mordovia — some 400 kilometers (250 miles) southeast of Moscow — a region notorious for its harsh jails.

Whelan has been left out of recent prisoner swaps negotiated between Russia and the United States.

"They've basically abandoned me here," he told the BBC by phone. "I'm extremely

concerned."

"With each case, my case is going to the back of the line. They've kind of just left me in the dust. And at this point, this juncture, it's very concerning."

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Whelan, who also holds U.K., Irish and Canadian passports, worked in security for a U.S. vehicle parts company when he was arrested in Moscow in 2018.

He has always asserted that the evidence against him was falsified.

He told the BBC that he spends his days stitching work overalls and hats in a prison factory, and that his unheated barracks have black mold on the walls.

In November, Whelan's family said he had been "hit in the face" by a new prisoner, breaking his glasses.

Russia and the United States accuse each other of detaining the other's nationals for political purposes.

Earlier in December, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he wanted Moscow and Washington to reach a solution to release Whelan and detained Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich.

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On Dec. 14, a court in Moscow ruled that Gershkovich, who previously worked for AFP, be held in detention until Jan. 30.

Gershkovich, 32, was arrested on spying allegations during a reporting trip at the end of March in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg.

He, his employer and the U.S. government have all rejected the spying allegations. He faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

"There are contacts on this issue and dialogue is ongoing, but it's not straightforward," Putin said during his end-of-year press conference on Dec. 14.

"I hope we will find a solution. But the U.S. side should also hear us and make a decision that will suit the Russian Federation."

The U.S. State Department said Russia has so far refused all U.S. offers for the release of Gershkovich and Whelan.

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