



AS IT IS

US Basketball Star Griner Exchanged for Russian Arms Dealer

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The American basketball star and Olympic champion Brittney Griner is being released from prison. She had been held in Russia for almost 10 months.

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden said Thursday that Griner was on an airplane back to the U.S. She was arrested in February.

Russian officials said they found two small containers of marijuana oil in her bags as she arrived at the airport in Moscow.

She pleaded guilty to the charge in July and then faced trial. Griner said she mistakenly packed the objects in a **rush** to get to the airport. In August, she was sentenced to a prison term of nine years.

After months of negotiations between Russian and American officials, Griner was released in a prisoner **swap**. Russian weapons seller Viktor Bout is being sent home. Bout was serving a sentence of 25 years.

American officials said they had been hoping to also gain the release of businessman Paul Whelan. He was charged with spying in December 2018 and given a 16-year sentence in 2020.

In announcing the release of Griner, Biden spoke about Whelan. He said: “we’ve not forgotten about Paul Whelan...We will keep negotiating in **good faith** for Paul’s release.”

Whelan’s brother, David, said the U.S. made the right choice to bring Griner home instead of waiting for a trade “that wasn’t going to happen.”

Officials said the prisoner exchange happened in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates.

Griner was arrested on February 17, but the news did not come out until March. Russia invaded Ukraine in late February.

Griner traveled to Russia to play basketball for her team, UMMC Ekaterinburg. The fact that Griner, one of the top players in the American basketball league for women – the WNBA - had to play games in Russia had many people asking why the league does not pay its players more.

She is also married to a woman, which made many pay attention to how Russia treats Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people.

Lawyers said the nine-year prison term was too much for the offense of bringing a small amount of marijuana oil into Russia. At her sentencing, Griner said she was sorry, and she hoped the ruling “does not end my life.”

The negotiations related to Griner, however, led to the highest-level communication between Russia and the U.S. in over five months.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke about Griner’s case.

I’m Dan Friedell.

Dan Friedell adapted this story for VOA Learning English based on a report by the Associated Press.

Words in This Story

rush -*n.* a situation in which someone is in a hurry and not thinking about what they are doing

swap -*n.* an exchange

good faith -*n. (idiom)* dealing with someone honestly in the correct way

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