

Brittney Griner arrives in the US after prisoner exchange

Kevin Reed
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American professional basketball star Brittney Griner arrived in San Antonio, Texas on Friday following her release from 10 months of Russian custody in a prisoner exchange brokered by the US and Russian governments.

She was transported to the Brooke Army Medical Center at the US Army's Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston for a health examination and to receive any necessary medical treatment.

Griner was traded by the Biden administration late Thursday for Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer who was serving a 25-year sentence in a US penitentiary after being convicted by a jury in federal court on multiple arms and terrorism charges in 2012.

Griner, 32, was imprisoned at Female Penal Colony IK-2 in the remote town of Yavas in the Russian Republic of Mordovia, approximately 300 miles southeast of Moscow. She was sent there by Russian authorities in mid-November from an undisclosed location where she was being held after being tried and convicted in a court in Khimki, a suburb of Moscow.

The internationally renowned athlete—who was beloved in Russia, where she played professionally during the American WNBA off-season—was found guilty of drug smuggling in a frame-up on August 4, six months after she was detained at Sheremetyevo International Airport in Moscow.

On February 17, Russian customs officials found two vaporizer cartridges containing less than one gram of cannabis oil in her possession and arrested her. She had been legally prescribed the medicinal cannabis by her doctor in Arizona for back pain caused by playing professional basketball. The drug is illegal in Russia.

During her trial, Griner pleaded guilty to the smuggling charges but said she did not intend to break the law. Her cruel sentence of nine years by the Russian

court was politically motivated and a transparent effort by the Putin regime to use the basketball star as a pawn in negotiations with the White House.

For its part, the Biden administration sought to use the outpouring of public sympathy and outrage over the Russian detention of Griner to further its own military and political objectives against Moscow.

Throughout the negotiations, the US State Department sought to include Paul Whelan, a former Marine who was arrested in Russia in 2018 and put on trial two years later for spying and sentenced to 16 years in prison, as part of the exchange. However, in the end, the Russian government agreed only to release Griner for Bout.

CBS News reported on Friday that an unnamed US official said, “the Russians told the US that they would swap Whelan for Vadim Krasikov, a Russian assassin who is part of the Kremlin's domestic spy organization — and who is being detained in Germany for murder.” When the US suggested the Russian proposal to trade a “spy for a spy” to Germany, “Berlin flatly rejected the idea.”

The Associated Press reported on Thursday that the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed the prisoner swap, saying the exchange of Griner for Bout took place in Abu Dhabi. The report said, “Russian media showed Griner walking off a Russian plane in Abu Dhabi where she was greeted by a US official. Two Russians greeted Bout with a hug.”

Some Republican politicians and right-wing media have seized upon the failure of the Biden administration to secure the release of Whelan as a means of further whipping up anti-Russian sentiment among the US public.

Republican House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California called the prisoner swap “a gift” to

Russian President Vladimir Putin that “endangers American lives.” On Fox News, Senator John Barrasso (Republican of Wyoming) said that swapping Griner for Bout is not a fair exchange and that “this is a Russian play right out of their playbook.”

The response of the entire US corporate media in calling Viktor Bout the “merchant of death” is particularly hypocritical. Bout was convicted in 2011 of conspiracy to kill US citizens and officials, delivery of anti-aircraft missiles, and providing aid to a terrorist organization.

However, the biggest merchant of death in the world is the US government itself, which is currently conducting decades-long wars with no end in sight in the Middle East and North Africa that have killed or injured millions of people.



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