

# VOA NEWS

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This is VOA News. I'm Joe Ramsey.

The United States and Russia completed a 24-person prisoner swap on Thursday, the largest in post-Soviet history, with Moscow releasing journalist Evan [Gersh...] Gershkovich and fellow American Paul Whelan in a multinational deal. VOA's chief national correspondent Steve Herman reports from Washington.

President Joe Biden stressed getting the Americans and others out of Russian prisons was a feat of diplomacy and friendship.

"For anyone who questions whether allies matter, they do. They matter."

Biden was asked how he would reply to Donald Trump's assertion he could have freed all the Americans without any concessions.

"Why didn't he do it when he was president?"

Trump later on social media criticized the deal, calling prisoner swaps extortion of the United States.

Steve Herman, VOA News, Washington.

One prisoner has spent over five and a half years behind bars in Russia while other high-profile detainees were released ahead of him. Another has been jailed only a few months. They include journalists, veteran political activists and those simply opposed to the war in Ukraine.

Among the Russians jailed in the West were alleged sleeper agents who lived double lives, while others convicted of hacking computers or the brazen daytime shooting of a man in a Berlin park. The youngest 19, the oldest 71.

Mourners in Beirut attended the funeral of a top Hezbollah commander on Thursday who was killed in an Israeli strike in the southern suburb of the Lebanese capital. People waved flags and held images of the slain commander as his coffin was carried in the procession by members.

Lebanese Hezbollah's head [hazra..] Hassan Nasrallah vowed on Thursday to respond to Israel's killing of the group's top military commander.

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South Korea's Red Cross said on Thursday it is willing to provide humanitarian aid to the flood-hit North. AP correspondent Charles De Ledesma reports.

The secretary-general of South Korea's Red Cross, Park Jong-sul, says his organization is willing to provide necessary supplies and is also ready to discuss items, scales and methods with North Korea's Red Cross, adding, we expect a swift response from the North.

North Korean state media said on Wednesday that recent heavy rains had left over 4,000 houses, over 7,000 acres of agricultural fields and numerous other public buildings, structures, roads and railways flooded in the northwest. The north has not yet reported details about casualties.

I'm Charles De Ledesma.

Thousands of Nigerians on Thursday protested against the country's worst cost of living crisis in a generation. Security forces fired tear gas to disperse crowds in several places. Roads were blocked in parts of the country while many businesses were also shut amid fears of violence.

Rights groups and activists had raised concerns about a possible clampdown on the demonstrations.

Nigeria is one of Africa's top oil producers, but its population of more than 210 million people are among the poorest in the world.

Former U.S. presidents from opposing political parties are joining a commission planning America's 250th birthday party, according to an announcement on Thursday. AP correspondent Jennifer King reports.

George W. Bush and Barack Obama will join America 250, an organization created by Congress to oversee upcoming commemorations in 2026 of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The former presidents, along with first ladies Laura Bush and Michelle Obama, will serve as Honorary National Co-Chairs.

Former U.S. Treasurer Rosie Rios says the 250th birthday, a celebration of democracy, is a grassroots effort that all Americans can be a part of.

The commission's leaders hope that bringing together the two recent Democratic and Republican presidents will serve as an example of bipartisan cooperation in an era of polarization.

I'm Jennifer King.

A New York appeals court has denied Donald Trump's bid to end a gag order in his hush money criminal case. The court on Thursday rejected the Republican former president's argument his May conviction, quote, "constitutes a change in circumstance(s)" that warrants lifting the restrictions.

A five-judge panel in the state's mid-level appellate court ruled the trial judge was correct in extending parts of the gag order until Trump is sentenced.

The trial judge imposed the gag order in March after prosecutors raised concerns about Trump's habit of attacking people involved in his cases. Trump has denied any wrongdoing.

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