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NATIONAL SECURITY

U.S. and Iran Exchange Prisoners in Deal

Iran frees U.S. Navy veteran, Michael White, after he was held for nearly two years



Michael White with his mother, Joanna White, in 2018. The U.S. Navy veteran had been sentenced to 10 years in prison in Iran.

PHOTO: WHITE FAMILY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Jessica Donati](#) and [Sune Engel Rasmussen](#)

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WASHINGTON—Iran released U.S. Navy veteran Michael White after nearly two years in custody on Thursday as part of a prisoner deal negotiated with Iran, a U.S. official and others involved in the exchange said.

Mr. White, who suffered from acute asthma and a recurrence of cancer in prison, was released on medical furlough to the Swiss Embassy in March on the condition he remained in Iran. He

later was diagnosed with Covid-19 and admitted to an Iranian hospital.

“I am blessed to announce that the nightmare is over, and my son is safely on his way home,” his mother, Joanna White, said in a statement.

As part of the deal, the U.S. has freed a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, Matteo Taerri, a medical doctor who had been imprisoned on charges of evading sanctions, according to his lawyer and court records.

Both Washington and Tehran have been calling for prisoners to be released due to concerns about the spread of the new coronavirus in prisons.

President Trump tweeted that Mr. White was due to return home soon and thanked Switzerland for helping to secure his release.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted on Thursday he was glad that Messrs. Taerri and White soon would be joining their families, and that a second Iranian, Sirous Asgari, had returned to Iran Wednesday after being acquitted by a U.S. court on allegations of stealing trade secrets.

“This can happen for all prisoners. No need for cherry picking,” Mr. Zarif tweeted. “Iranian hostages held in—and on behalf of—the U.S. should come home.”

Mr. White, 48 years old, was among nearly 100,000 prisoners released on furlough in Iran after the outbreak of the new coronavirus. The gravity of his condition in the hospital wasn't known. He was discharged from the hospital before being released to the U.S.

Mr. White was detained on undisclosed charges in Iran while trying to leave the country with his Iranian girlfriend, and later sentenced to 10 years in prison. Tehran has a history of arresting people with foreign ties and using them as bargaining chips. The Swiss Embassy has represented U.S. interests in Iran since 1980.

Mr. Taerri, also known as Majid Taheri, will travel to Iran to visit family in the coming days, his lawyer said. He plans to remain in the U.S. and hopes to continue to practice medicine after he returns.

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“I can’t speak to how he was chosen [for the deal] but we’ve been negotiating with the Iranian government and the State Department for many months,” Steven Paul Berne, his lawyer, told The Wall Street Journal.

Mr. Berne said his client was conditionally released from custody to home incarceration about two months ago and had been waiting for the deal to be completed to be set free.

The prisoner exchange comes at a time of eased tensions between the U.S. and Iran in the Middle East. The two countries appeared close to direct military conflict after the U.S. killing of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January.

The U.S. military in March began to draw small numbers of troops from the Middle East after concluding that the threat of reprisal attacks from Iran or its allied militias had subsided.

In Iraq, rocket attacks by Iranian-backed militants have tailed off since March. The Persian Gulf has also been relatively quiet after a series of confrontations and seizures of oil tankers by Iran last year, aside from one incident in April in which the U.S. Navy accused Iranian forces of harassment.

Former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who acted as an intermediary in the prisoner deal, said he hoped that more detainees could be freed as part of a humanitarian exchange.

“I don’t see the relationship improving politically or strategically before the election, so at least let’s concentrate on joint efforts to release hostages on both sides,” he told the Journal.

Mr. Richardson also helped secure the release of U.S. citizen Xiyue Wang, a Princeton academic, as part of a swap last December.

Mr. Wang was arrested while researching century-old manuscripts and sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of espionage. U.S. officials denied Mr. Wang was a spy. Massoud Soleimani, an Iranian professor held in the U.S. on charges of violating sanctions, was freed at the same time.

Sirous Asgari, the second Iranian released by the U.S., returned home this week. Mr. Asgari was acquitted in November on U.S. charges of stealing trade secrets and visa fraud. The U.S. had been trying to deport him for several months and denied he was part of the exchange.

“Sirous Asgari was not a participant in a prisoner deal for Michael White. We have tried to deport Asgari since December, but the Iranians stalled until this week,” said Ken Cuccinelli, acting deputy secretary at the Department of Homeland Security, on Twitter.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that U.S. officials were “pleased that Iran was constructive in this matter,” and called for the release of Americans detained in Iran and around the world.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Abbas Mousavi, said Mr. Asgari’s release wasn’t facilitated as part of a prisoner swap, but that the scientist had been freed because he was innocent.

The State Department is seeking the release of at least three other U.S. citizens detained in Iran on charges of collaborating with the U.S.: Baquer Namazi; his son, Siamak Namazi; and Morad Tahbaz.

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