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Alan Gross' Release: How It Went Down

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KRISHNADEV CALAMUR



Alan Gross and his wife, Judy, in Washington on Wednesday after his release from a Cuban prison.

Algerina Perna/Baltimore Sun/TNS /Landov

American Alan Gross had spent more than five years in a Cuban prison, where he lost five teeth, 100 pounds and much of the sight in his right eye. He could barely walk because of chronic pain and was, his wife Judy Gross said in June, "despondent and

very hopeless" because he had 10 years to go in his sentence for crimes against the Cuban state. Then, on Tuesday, his lawyer, Scott Gilbert, told him in a phone call that he was going home.

There was a long pause, his spokeswoman Jill Zuckman said today in Washington, and then Gross said, "I'll believe it when I see it."

The events were a culmination of a months-long process that began in the spring when President Obama authorized high-level contact with the Cuban government, a senior administration official said. Multiple meetings were held with Cuban officials, mostly in Canada. The Vatican also hosted both sides for talks, and Pope Francis called on Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro to resolve Gross' case and build relations.

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Those efforts worked. Today, a U.S. government plane took Judy Gross, Gilbert, Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., as well as Reps. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., and Barbara Lee, D-Calif., from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland to Havana. They were there for 30 minutes and were reunited with Gross.

"A big bowl of popcorn was waiting for Alan," Zuckman said. That's what he'd previously wanted. Gross also ate a corned beef sandwich on rye with mustard and latkes, "a nice Hanukkah present."

At 8:45 a.m., the pilot announced that they had left Cuban airspace.

"Alan stood up and took a deep breath," Zuckman said.

He called his daughters in Israel and Oregon. His first words to them: "I'm free."

President Obama called Gross on the aircraft and congratulated him on his newfound freedom. Gross, Zuckman said, thanked Obama for securing his release.

Upon arrival in Maryland, Gross was met by lawmakers including Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Barbara Mikulski, D-Md.

Secretary of State John Kerry's plane landed at Andrews around the same time, Zuckman said. Kerry gave Gross "a big hug," she said. At noon, they watched Obama's news conference in which the president announced Gross' release as well as a major policy shift toward Cuba.

Just hours later, Gross himself was standing in front of reporters, saying, "It's good to be home."

u.s. alan gross cuba

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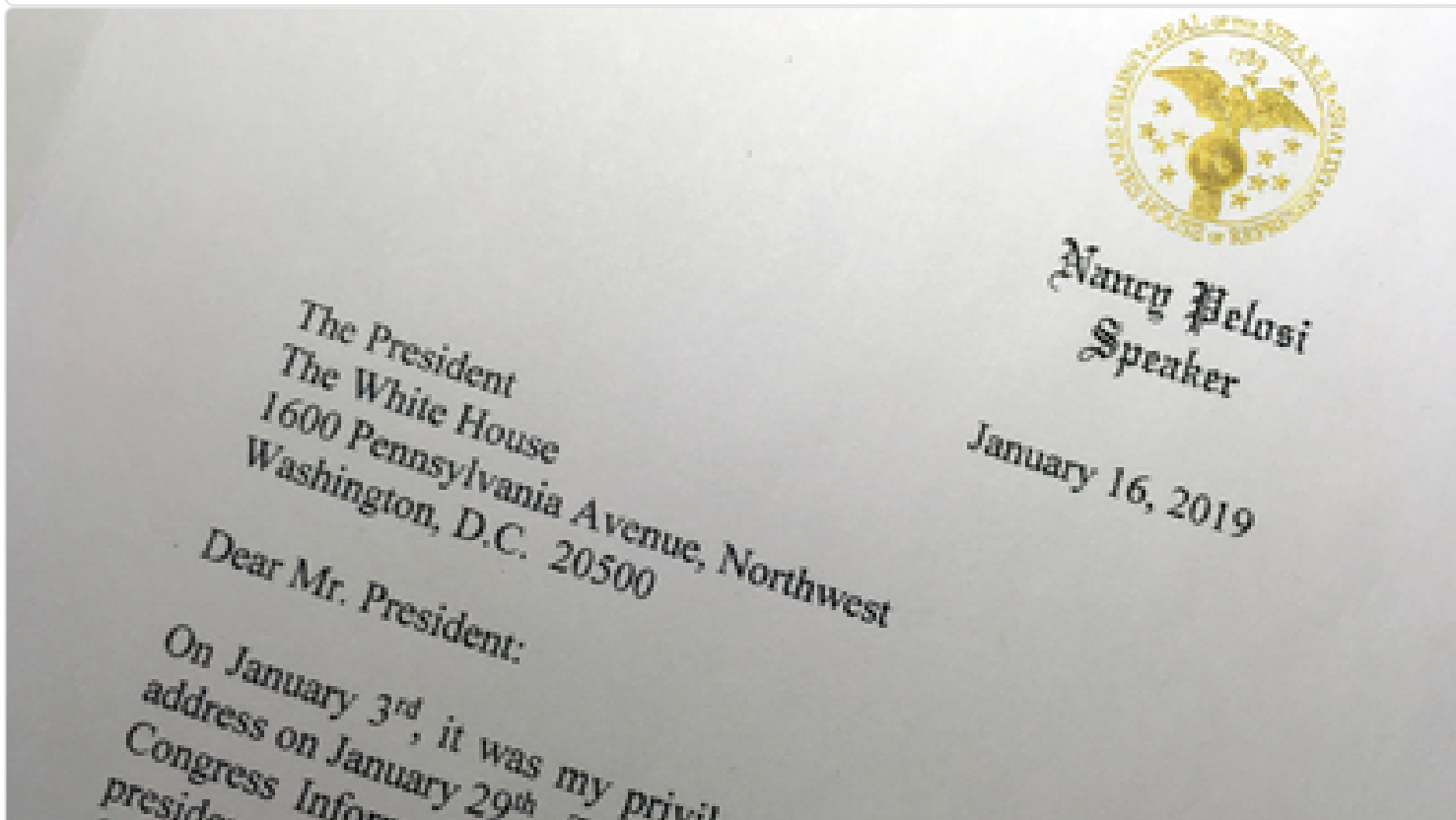
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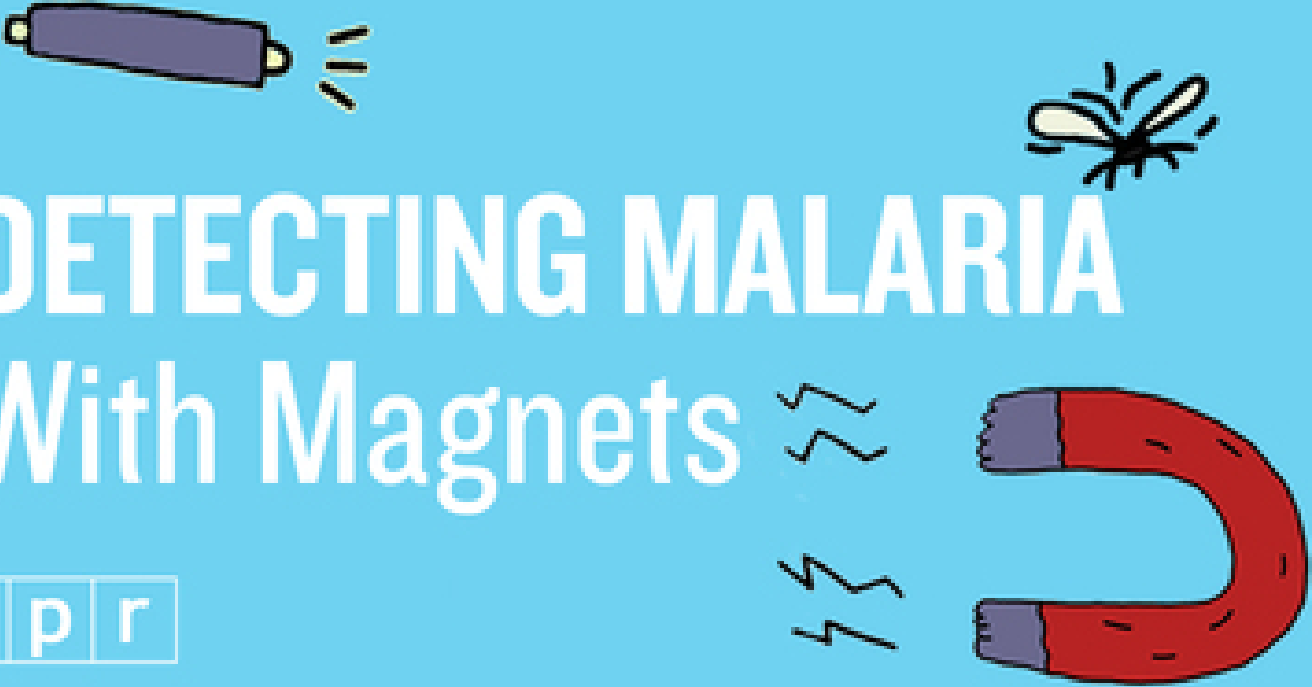
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