

# Gross release: How it happened

By Jake Tapper, Eric Bradner and Deirdre Walsh, CNN

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American freed after five years in Cuba 02:28

## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

The pre-dawn flight to Havana to retrieve Alan Gross was so secretive that much of the Pentagon was kept in the dark

U.S. diplomats in Cuba threw a party Tuesday night, keeping reporters there drinking late and distracted

Waiting for Gross on the U.S. government plane Wednesday morning was popcorn and a corned beef sandwich

the official residence of Chief of Mission Jeff Delaurentis on Tuesday night to keep about 100 journalists, diplomats and other bigwigs -- including Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.), sporting a white suit -- there distracted and drinking late.

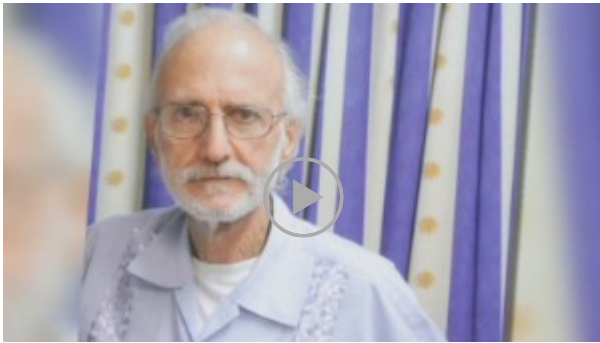
Alan Gross was in a Cuban prison Tuesday morning when his attorney, Scott Gilbert, phoned to say Gross would soon be released.

There was a long pause.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Gross finally said, according to family spokeswoman Jill Zuckman.

President Barack Obama's administration had secured Gross's release as part of a sweeping deal to thaw the decades-old diplomatic freeze with Cuba. Wednesday's announcement came after a year of secretive talks the two countries held in Canada, while Pope Francis was personally pressing the leaders of both countries to reach an agreement.

The details of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering were so closely guarded that U.S. diplomats in Cuba threw a party at



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The White House, meanwhile, kept much of the Pentagon in the dark, according to several U.S. officials.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey and other top brass were told Tuesday that the trip would happen -- but the logistics of the journey unfolded much the same way that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper had recently departed on a secret mission to retrieve two Americans from North Korea.

Moving quickly and quietly, the White House had gone straight to the 89th Airlift Wing at the Andrews Joint Air Base -- the group of military planes that includes Air Force One, and which the White House believes it controls, rather than the Pentagon -- with instructions to fly to Cuba.

Gross's wife Judy, his attorney Gilbert, Sens. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and Pat Leahy (D-Vt.), Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and

an Obama administration national security official arrived at Andrews in Wednesday's pre-dawn hours to board a plane headed for Havana.

The group departed at 5 a.m. and landed in Cuba at 8 a.m.

Gross was there waiting. The group spent about 30 minutes on the ground in Cuba before Gross boarded and found waiting for him a bowl of popcorn, which he had said he missed during his five years of captivity.

Also waiting for him: a corned beef on rye sandwich with mustard. Tuesday night marked the start of Chanukah, so there were also potato pancakes (or latkes) with applesauce and sour cream, traditional holiday foods.

At 8:45 a.m., the pilot announced that they were out of Cuban air space and would soon be entering U.S. airspace.

Alan Gross stood. He took a deep breath.

He called his daughter Shira in Tel Aviv and his daughter Nina in Oregon.

"I'm free," he told them.

Obama called Gross and congratulated him on his freedom. Gross thanked him for getting him out of prison. It was a friendly call, Zuckman said.

The plane landed at Andrews where other members of Congress awaited: Democratic Sens. Dick Durbin of Illinois, Barbara Mikulski and Ben Cardin of Maryland and Carl Levin of Michigan, as well as Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.).

While they all talked inside a building there, by coincidence, the plane of Secretary of State John Kerry landed at Andrews, Zuckman said.

Kerry came from his plane to greet Gross, giving him a big hug.

The two sat next to each other on a leather couch watching Obama announce the new Cuba policy. Then they all came to the downtown office building of Gross's lawyer where he delivered the prepared remarks carried on national television.

Gross has a number of health issues and has lost about five teeth while in captivity. Zuckman said he is now focused on taking time to work on his health, visiting doctors and a dentist, as well as spending time with his family.

When the three members of Congress were asked at a press conference on Capitol Hill Wednesday why they were picked to serve as the U.S. delegation to pick up Gross, Leahy joked that "we had frequent flier miles."

The lawmakers said they'd learned recently that a deal was close.

"It was pretty clear over the last couple of weeks that something was finally coming together," Van Hollen said Wednesday.

He said Obama's national security adviser, Susan Rice, called him earlier this week about the plan, but said there were "a lot of logistics" to work out. Two planes -- one to pick up Gross in Havana and one to deliver Cuban prisoners released by the United States -- ended up on the tarmac at the same time, Van Hollen said.

Gross's wife was emotional on the plane ride to Havana, he said.

"She was tearing up and she asked for tissues before she went in [to greet her husband] and she needed them," Van Hollen said.

Gross, who lived in Maryland, is a Van Hollen constituent who had gone door to door for Van Hollen's first campaign for Congress. Gross actually called Van Hollen on his cell phone from Cuba in October before the midterms to wish him luck in his re-election. "Over time he was granted telephone privileges," Van Hollen said.

He said the delegation met briefly with the Cuba's foreign minister when they landed in Havana, at a small airport near the city's much larger one.

They were escorted by Cuban officials through the airport and into a room where Gross was waiting, along with two other American officials.

Gross "looks very frail but his spirits were high," Van Hollen said.

"He was clearly elated."

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