

Prisoner release from Cuba hailed as a Hanukkah miracle

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Alan Gross, the Jewish international aid worker held for five years in Cuba on charges of spying, was freed Wednesday (December 17)—what some are calling a Hanukkah miracle on the first day of the holiday that celebrates religious freedom.

Gross, 65, of Maryland, has always said that he only went to Cuba to bring communications equipment to the small Jewish community left in Havana. However, the Castro government said he was part of a spy network attempting to set up a secret network for Cuban Jews. Gross was serving a 15-year sentence.

President Obama chose Wednesday's release as a springboard to announce a massive historic "normalization" of U.S.-Cuba relations. Meanwhile, in Cuba, President Raul Castro, who held a news conference in Havana at noon, was expected to release 53 Cuban political prisoners.

Obama particularly credited the "moral example of Pope Francis," who actively encouraged Gross's release. Francis, who held private meetings at the Vatican to secure the deal, praised the move, sending "his warm congratulations for the historic decision taken by the Governments of the United States of America and Cuba to establish diplomatic relations, with the aim of overcoming, in the interest of the citizens of both countries, the difficulties which have marked their recent history."

Jewish voices that had lobbied for Gross's freedom celebrated and praised his wife, Judy, for her tireless efforts to free the man who had become a cause celebre for many Jewish activists:

The Orthodox Union noted that Gross's release coincides with the Torah portion recounting "the release of Joseph from his own unjust imprisonment in ancient

Egypt.”

Anti-Defamation League Director Abraham H. Foxman rejoiced with Gross’ family, saying in a statement, “For five long years, Mr. Gross’ incarceration has been used by the Cuban government for political purposes on issues that had nothing to do with him and his alleged activities.”

The Jewish Federations of North America said in a press release that all human rights activists are “uplifted” by the news. Board chairman Michael Siegal said several Jewish groups spoke “as recently as this week . . . publicly and privately to the very highest levels of the U.S. government” to secure Gross’s freedom.

The National Jewish Democratic Council highlighted the political overtones in its praise for the “landmark humanitarian deal” struck by the White House, an event that Greg Rosenbaum, chair of the NJDC board of directors, said felt like a Hanukkah miracle.

At one level, it was a prisoner swap. The U.S. is sending home to Cuba three men who had been convicted in 2001 as foreign agents who conspired to spy in South Florida. In return, Cuba returned back an unnamed man who reportedly worked for U.S. intelligence agencies, according to *The New York Times*. Gross’s release was an additional humanitarian gesture because he was reportedly in ill health.

Gross’s lawyer and family have described him as “mentally vanquished, gaunt, hobbling, and missing five teeth,” according to the *Jewish Daily Forward*.

Obama cannot overturn the congressionally mandated trade and tourism embargo between the U.S. and the communist island, but he could undercut it by opening the embassy in Havana and removing Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. On Wednesday, he said that Cuban human, political, and economic rights are still of grave concern to the U.S., but “through a policy of engagement, we can more effectively stand up” for those values of “dignity and self-determination.”