

# Woman pleads guilty in scheme to offer information to Russia

By John Raby | AP

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. — A West Virginia woman who previously served in the Air Force planned to offer top-secret information from the National Security Agency to the Russian government, prosecutors said Monday in announcing her conviction in federal court.

Elizabeth Jo Shirley pleaded guilty as part of a plea agreement to one count each of willful retention of national defense information and international parental kidnapping, the U.S. Justice Department said in a news release.

Shirley, 46, of Hedgesville, faces up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine on the national security charge and up to three years and a \$250,000 fine on the kidnapping charge. The statement did not say whether a sentencing date was set in federal court in Martinsburg.

“Federal government employees and contractors with high level security clearances pledge to protect classified information from foreign adversaries. It’s an essential responsibility in guarding our country’s national security,” said Michael Christmas, the FBI’s special agent in charge in Pittsburgh.

“Ms. Shirley had a duty to safeguard classified information. Instead, she chose to break the law and trust placed in her and made plans to pass national defense information to Russian officials, which could have put our citizens at risk.”

Prosecutors said Shirley leased a storage unit and kept a document — without authorization — relating to national defense that outlines intelligence information regarding a foreign government’s military and political issues.

Shirley worked on assignments with the National Security Agency while serving in the Air Force.

From 2001 to 2012, Shirley held various positions with the Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence, the departments of Defense and Energy, the National Cyber Investigative Joint Task Force and at least five different cleared defense contractors. She also held top-level security clearances at various times, the statement said.

It added that Shirley was accused of kidnapping her 6-year-old daughter in July 2019 after she failed to return the child on the agreed-upon date to the girl's custodial father, the primary residential parent, and his wife in West Virginia.

Shirley reported that she was having car trouble and promised to make the drop-off the following day, but instead headed toward the airport and ultimately left the country, authorities said.

Prosecutors said Shirley went to Mexico with the intent of contacting Russian government representatives to request resettlement in a country that would not extradite her back to the United States.

While in Mexico, Shirley prepared a written message that referenced an "urgent need" to have items shipped from the United States related to her "life's work before they are seized and destroyed," prosecutors said.

Shirley was arrested last August at a hotel in Mexico City and the girl was returned to her father. Authorities said the NSA document was located that month in a storage locker in Martinsburg, while messages Shirley had drafted to Russian government officials along with other classified information were found on her electronic devices.

"Given Shirley's troubling conduct after fleeing the United States, the damage to national security could have been far greater had law enforcement not acted swiftly," said John C. Demers, an assistant attorney general for national security. "Shirley will now be held accountable for betraying the trust of the American people."

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This story corrects that Shirley is 46, not 47 as authorities said previously.

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