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Thailand to Extradite Suspected Russian Arms Dealer

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Alleged Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout arriving at a Bangkok criminal court on Friday, ahead of an appeals court decision on extraditing him to the United States. **Sukree Sukplang**

BANGKOK ⊠ A Thai appeals court ruled Friday that suspected Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout can be extradited to the United States to face terrorism charges, a development that follows two years of diplomatic pressure from Washington.

Nicknamed the "Merchant of Death," the 43-year-old faces U.S. accusations of having trafficked arms since the 1990s to dictators and conflict zones in Africa, South America and the Middle East.

The verdict was a victory for the U.S. government, which had summoned the Thai ambassador in Washington last week to express concern that Bout could be freed.

"We are extremely pleased," Acting Deputy U.S. Attorney General Gary G. Grindler said in a statement. "We have always felt that the facts of the case, the relevant Thai law and the terms of our bilateral extradition treaty clearly supported the extradition of Mr. Bout on these

charges."

Bout has been held in a Thai maximum-security prison since his arrest in March 2008 during a joint U.S.-Thai sting operation in which agents posed as arms buyers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

U.S. lawmakers had sent a letter sent to the Thai government in April warning the case could harm bilateral relations.

Moscow also had lobbied Thailand, seeking Bout's release and fueling speculation that the former Soviet air force officer was receiving protection from Russian authorities who had made no overt attempt over the years to interfere in his operations.

Russia's foreign ministry called the ruling "unlawful" and vowed to seek his release. "We regret this ... unlawful, political decision," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said during a visit to Armenia. "I assure you, we will continue to do everything necessary to secure his return to his homeland."

The appeals court overturned a 2009 lower court decision that did not recognize FARC as a terrorist group. The appeals court said the case was criminal, not political, so Bout should be extradited and handed to U.S. authorities within three months.

Bout's wife, Alla, accused Thai authorities of succumbing to pressure from Washington. "This is a result of constant pressure from the U.S. government," she said, moments after hugging her shackled husband as guards whisked him away.

"This is the most unfair decision, because the initial court already said it's a political case," she added, before breaking down in tears.

U.S. prosecutors say Bout's clients included former Liberian dictator Charles Taylor and Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and that his deals helped fuel wars in Afghanistan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

Bout denied the charges pressed against him in Thailand, saying he ran a legitimate air-cargo business and that he was in Bangkok to discuss airplane sales when he was arrested. His lawyer, Lak Nittiwattanawichan, said he would petition the Thai government to block extradition.

"The defense believes Bout will not be safe in the U.S. and he will not receive a fair trial," Lak told reporters.

The appeals court judge said Thailand had laws similar to those of the United States under which Bout could be charged, and therefore he must be extradited according to a treaty between the countries.

According to the U.S. indictment, Bout told undercover agents in Bangkok that he could supply them with 700 to 800 surface-to-air missiles, millions of rounds of ammunition, C-4 explosives, landmines, unmanned aerial drones and 5,000 AK-47 assault rifles.

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