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A Big Break for U.S. in Case of Viktor Bout

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Suspected Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout sitting in a holding cell ahead of a Bangkok court hearing on Friday. **Sukree Sukplang**

WASHINGTON — If Viktor Bout should start talking to U.S. prosecutors, as they are trying to arrange, the man accused of supplying the weapons for civil wars on three continents could raise the roof in both Moscow and Washington.

A tug of war between the two powers has played out largely in public over Bout, called "the Merchant of Death" in 2000 by a minister in Britain's Foreign Office. On Friday, an appeals court in Bangkok, Thailand, ordered his extradition within three months to the United States, where he faces criminal charges that could put him in prison for life.

An arms trafficker who assembled a fleet of cast-off Russian cargo planes and operated a transcontinental network for more than a decade would not have stayed alive, much less thrived, unless he had the blessing and support of influential Russian officials, said people in and out of the U.S. government who have watched Bout's operations from afar.

Bout has even made money off those who said they wanted to put him out of business: the U.S. government and the United Nations. He ignored sanctions by both, while counting as customers the U.S. military in Iraq and UN aid programs.

And now?

The Russians "wanted him back because he's linked to Russian intelligence," said U.S. congressman Ed Royce. "He lived in the open in Russia despite an Interpol arrest warrant" from a Belgian money-laundering case.

But the Russians say it is just about international politics.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the Thai court decision "unlawful and political." Without mentioning the United States, he said the ruling was influenced by "very strong outside pressure."

"I assure you that we will continue to do everything necessary to push for his return to his homeland," Lavrov said.

Juan Zarate, a senior counterterrorism official in the George W. Bush administration, said the Russians were pushing hard over the issue of sovereignty.

"They don't like the fact that one of their citizens, especially one who's so prominent and notorious, is facing charges in the United States," said Zarate, who green-lighted a Drug Enforcement Administration sting operation that led to Bout's arrest in Thailand in 2008.

Zarate also pointed to Bout's "deep connections with the Russian establishment for some time," saying "perhaps some of those people are nervous about what he knows and what he might say if he lands in a courtroom in New York."

Royce, the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, assessed the verdict in the Thai court this way: "It's a big loss for every terror group that's tried to employ him in the past, from the Taliban to Hezbollah to al-Shabab."

Bout is thought to have supplied weapons that fueled civil wars in South America, the Middle East and Africa, with clients including Liberia's Charles Taylor, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and both sides of the civil war in Angola.

On Friday, dressed in an orange prison uniform, Bout stood after the appeals court verdict was announced. Tears welled in his eyes as he hugged his wife and daughter, who wept.

"This is the most unfair decision possible," his wife, Alla Bout, told reporters, speaking in Russian through a translator. "It is known the world over that this is a political case."

In Russia, her remarks received wide coverage on state television.

Her husband vowed to win his freedom. "We will face the trial in the United States and win it," Bout told reporters.

Bout was led out of the courtroom and back to a Bangkok prison, where court officials said he would remain until the extradition is processed.

Before a prize catch like Bout would start telling important stories, the 43-year-old Russian would have to be facing lengthy time behind bars.

So far, he has spent two years in a Thai prison.

In the criminal case that landed him there, Bout assured two confidential sources posing as arms buyers that he was going to prepare everything that the Colombian narcoterrorist group FARC needed, according to the U.S. indictment. Bout's assurance came after the two agents said they wanted arms for use against U.S. forces in Colombia and needed anti-aircraft weapons to kill U.S. pilots.

Bout advised them that the United States also was his enemy, according to the indictment, which said the meeting was covertly recorded.

Nonetheless, Moscow wants Bout to come home.

"In this case, it is not law and justice that is supreme but a politically motivated line towed from abroad by the American authors of the extradition request," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Bout "was responsible for arms trafficking and supporting terrorist organizations on multiple continents," John Brennan, President Barack Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser, told a White House press briefing. "We are very pleased with the cooperation of Thai authorities, and we are looking forward to his expeditious return here."

The U.S. Justice Department has made Bout's extradition a major issue with the Thai government, dating back to Obama's first year in office.

Last October, then-Deputy Attorney General David Ogden made a side trip to Bangkok from a law enforcement meeting he was attending in Singapore. Bout's extradition was the only item on the agenda in the discussion with Thai officials, and Ogden went public, saying it was a matter of great importance.

Late Wednesday night, acting Deputy Attorney General Gary Grindler had a half-hour phone conversation with the Thai attorney general, Chulasingh Vasantasingh. That was followed by meetings Thursday in Bangkok among officials from the U.S. Embassy and representatives of the Thai government.

It was unclear just how the Thai court arrived at its decision, which came as a surprise to U.S. officials. A lower court's ruling in Thailand a year ago rejected the U.S. request that Bout be brought to the United States.

Two weeks ago, the U.S. government announced its intent to sell Thailand three Black Hawk helicopters and support equipment worth $150 million, the third such helicopter sale to Bangkok in five years. The two countries have close military ties, and notification of the latest sale to Congress said that it would "contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a major non-NATO ally."

"We functioned within a legitimate legal process within Thailand," said State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley. "Thailand has its own independent judiciary, and we're pleased that they, having evaluated the evidence presented, came to what we thought was the appropriate conclusion."

A Canadian government official confirmed that the United States asked a couple of like-minded states including Canada to proactively urge the Thai government to have this matter move forward expeditiously, and Canada agreed to do that. The official, speaking on condition on anonymity, was not authorized to speak publicly about it.

A former U.S. official familiar with the extradition effort said the State Department and other U.S. agencies, including Defense and Justice, "pulled out the stops" in recent days, urging Thai counterparts to ensure that Bout was sent to trial in the United States. The former official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the case, said several governments, including Canadian officials, also weighed in.

That official said last-ditch appeals by Russia, coupled with extensive paperwork, could extend Bout's Bangkok prison stay as long as 90 days before he could be extradited. An appeal directly to the Thai royal family is expected.

The U.S. indictment accuses Bout of conspiring to sell millions of dollars worth of weapons to FARC, including more than 700 surface-to-air missiles, thousands of guns, high-tech helicopters and airplanes outfitted with grenade launchers and missiles. It also charges him with conspiring to kill Americans, conspiring to kill U.S. officers or employees and conspiring to provide material support to terrorists.

In August of last year, the Bangkok Criminal Court rejected a U.S. extradition request. It said Thailand considers FARC a political movement and not a terrorist group. The appeals court disagreed, saying Friday that under Thai law the charges against Bout were considered criminal, not political.

Lee Wolosky, director for transnational threats at the U.S. National Security Council during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, said Friday that the appeals court decision ends a decade-long chase by law enforcement.

"Viktor Bout has contributed significantly to the world's misery and has fueled the world's armed conflicts," said Wolosky, who headed the first U.S. effort to bring Bout to trial. "Today's decision brings to an end Bout's decade-long run from the long arms of American justice."

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