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Thailand Says Bout's Extradition Can't Be Rushed

By Jocelyn Gecker

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Viktor Bout, a suspected Russian arms dealer, being escorted by prison officials Aug. 20 as he arrives at a criminal court in Bangkok. **Apichart Weerawong**

BANGKOK — Thailand's leader delivered a stern message to Washington on Wednesday that the extradition of suspected Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout could not be rushed and would only happen after the necessary legal steps are completed.

"We are not sending Viktor Bout back today," Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva told reporters. "There are still several legal steps to go through."

Abhisit's comments came after a flurry of overnight rumors that Bout's extradition had already taken place or that Bout would be escorted by commandos and handed over to U.S. authorities on Wednesday morning. Other Thai officials also indicated that the United States was trying to speed the legal process but said Thailand would not be pressured.

Bout, a 43-year-old former Soviet Air Force officer, is reputed to be one of the world's most prolific arms dealers. A Thai appeals court on Friday ordered Bout's extradition within three months to face four terrorism-related charges in the United States. U.S. authorities want him turned over quickly, but a legal bottleneck appears to have stalled the process.

The U.S. Embassy declined any comment on the case or on Thai news reports that a U.S. government plane had landed at a military airport adjacent to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport Tuesday.

"Due to security reasons, we will not comment on pending extradition cases," embassy spokeswoman Kristin Kneedler said.

Thailand's National Security Council met on Wednesday to discuss Bout's extradition.

"The United States must not exert pressure in any way," Abhisit told reporters afterward. "Every country has to respect the sovereignty of other countries. There are treaties and laws to follow."

U.S. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley on Tuesday night would not discuss the timing of a possible extradition, except to say it was "pending."

"We look forward to seeing him in a U.S. court," Crowley said.

In an illustration of the confusion, the Bangkok Post newspaper reported on its front page Wednesday that the extradition had already taken place, with the headline "U.S. Swoops to Grab Bout."

Prior to Friday's ruling, the United States had filed additional charges against Bout — a step that was now slowing down his extradition because Bout cannot legally leave Thailand until he goes to court to hear the charges or the United States drops them, said Sirisak Tiyapan, director of the international division at the Office of the Attorney General. The new charges of money laundering and wire fraud stem from an updated U.S. indictment against Bout filed in February 2009.

"I gather the U.S. government has contacted the Foreign Ministry asking to drop the second charges," Sirisak said.

If that happens, the ministry would notify the prosecutor's office, which would ask the court to drop the charges, and then the court could process the request. The extradition itself involves separate paperwork.

Bout was arrested in Bangkok in March 2008 as part of a U.S.-led sting operation. The case set off a diplomatic tug of war between Washington and Moscow, which opposes the extradition.

Bout is accused of supplying 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.

The head of a lucrative air-transport empire, Bout had long evaded UN and U.S. sanctions aimed at blocking his financial activities and restricting his travel. He has denied any

involvement in illicit activities and claims that he ran a legitimate business.

Bout's arrest at a Bangkok luxury hotel was part of an elaborate sting in which U.S. agents posed as arms buyers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, which Washington classifies as a terrorist organization.

Bout was subsequently indicted in the United States on four terrorism-related charges that include conspiring to kill Americans and 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.

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