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# Bout's Extradition to U.S. Delayed

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BANGKOK — A suspected Russian arms dealer's extradition to the United States will be delayed at least until Oct. 4 to allow a Thai court to review new charges filed as a precaution by Washington, a judge said Friday.

The announcement by the Bangkok Criminal Court is the latest blow to Washington, which had expected Viktor Bout's rapid extradition after a Thai appeals court gave its approval on Aug. 20.

The Bangkok Criminal Court in August 2009 rejected an initial U.S. extradition request in a ruling that stunned Washington. The United States responded by requesting an appeal, but also filed new charges against Bout to keep him detained in case the lower court's ruling was upheld.

When the appeals court reversed the ruling last month, the United States moved to drop the second charges. However, under Thai law, a defendant has the right to object to charges against him being dropped, Criminal Court Judge Krerkrit Ittarat said Friday. That means Bout could object to dropping the charges as a way to stall his extradition, a stance that his lawyer has said he will take.

The court said it previously set a date of Oct. 4 for Bout to hear the new charges and will stick to that schedule.

"Since there's already a court date and witness hearing scheduled for Oct. 4, the court will summon [Bout and his lawyer] then," the judge said. "But whether or not the court will rule to drop the charge is a different matter. The ruling could come on the same day or at some other date."

American officials initially praised the appeals court ruling but have been cautious in commenting since then.

"In accordance with State and Department of Justice policy, we do not comment on pending extradition cases," U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Kristin Kneedler said Friday. "We respect the Thai judicial system and are awaiting the completion of the final steps in the extradition process."

Bout, 43, is reputed to be one of the world's most prolific arms dealers.

His high-profile arrest in a 2008 U.S.-led sting operation in Bangkok ended a decade-long chase for the Russian, who has never been prosecuted despite being the subject of U.N. sanctions, a Belgian money-laundering indictment and a travel ban.

After last month's ruling, the United States quickly flew a plane to Bangkok to pick up Bout. The move was publicized in Thailand as the latest evidence of heavy U.S. pressure in a case that has turned into a diplomatic tug of war between Washington and Moscow.

Experts say Bout, a former Soviet Air Force officer, has knowledge of Russia's military and intelligence operations, and Moscow does not want him to go on trial in the United States.

Bout has been indicted in the United States on four terrorism-related charges and faces possible life in prison. The U.S. indictment alleges that Bout agreed to sell weapons to U.S. agents posing as arms buyers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, which Washington classifies as a terrorist organization. Bout denies the accusations.

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