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Thais Clear Way for Bout's Extradition

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BANGKOK — Suspected arms smuggler Viktor Bout was led off by masked commandos after a Thai court on Tuesday removed a key legal obstacle to his U.S. extradition, which has landed Thailand in the midst of a diplomatic tussle between Washington and Moscow.

Bout, accused of supplying weapons that fueled civil wars in South America, the Middle East and Africa, has been fighting extradition since his March 2008 arrest in Bangkok as part of a U.S.-led sting operation.

The Bangkok Criminal Court on Tuesday dismissed a new trial against Bout, which had threatened to stall the extradition further. It was the latest phase — and a potential turning point — in a long-running legal battle. Both Washington and Moscow have been demanding Bout's handover.

The announcement of the ruling stunned the normally stoic Bout, who was standing to hear the verdict but then sat and hugged his wife, who was seated beside him and began to weep. He then waded through the courtroom to his defense lawyer and with a look of concern said: "[Do] something now. The appeal. We need to appeal."

Court officials told reporters that the defense was not allowed to appeal. Only prosecutors who filed the charges of money laundering and wire fraud on behalf of the United States have the right to appeal within 72 hours, after which time Bout could be extradited. Prosecutors were not expected to appeal.

One possible twist: Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has said once the court process is finished he will have the final say in Bout's extradition.

Asked by reporters how he felt, Bout replied: "I don't know. I don't know what to say."

Shackled at the ankles, Bout was escorted in and out of the courtroom by masked commandos. He wore a bulletproof vest for his journey to and from prison. The vest was removed inside the courtroom.

The Thai Appeals Court gave its approval Aug. 20 for Bout's extradition to the United States to face trial on four terrorism-related charges that could land him in prison for life. That ruling reversed a lower court's decision.

But the process was stalled because, after the lower court rejected the request, Washington had filed a second set of charges to ensure that Bout wasn't set free. Working with Thai prosecutors, the United States then tried to drop those charges after the Appeal Court's ruling, but the Bangkok Criminal Court said Monday that the legal proceedings had already started and must be allowed to continue.

But in another twist in the case, the Criminal Court on Tuesday ruled to dismiss the second set of charges, saying there was no further legal reason to keep Bout from being extradited.

The apparent reversal from Monday to Tuesday appeared to be the court's way of saying it would not be pressured into prematurely dropping the second case before its first hearing.

It ruled that there was "a lack of evidence and witnesses" to prove the charges of money laundering and wire fraud, and would thus dismiss the case unless the prosecution appealed.

When the Appeals Court cleared the way for Bout's extradition in August, it said the extradition must take place within 90 days, or roughly by Nov. 20.

A U.S. Embassy spokeswoman in Bangkok could not immediately be reached for comment.

Russian officials say Bout is an innocent businessman and has demanded his return. Experts say Bout, a former Soviet Air Force officer, has knowledge of Russia's military and intelligence operations and that Moscow does not want him going on trial in the United States.

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