

# Thai Government Will Determine Bout's Fate

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Viktor Bout being escorted to a hearing at a Bangkok court on Tuesday. **Sukree Sukplang**

BANGKOK, Thailand — Thailand's government will hold a special meeting to discuss the pros and cons of extraditing suspected arms smuggler Viktor Bout to the United States, weighing concerns about relations with Moscow and Washington, the prime minister said.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva made the comments to Thai reporters traveling with him from Brussels to New York overnight Tuesday after a Thai court dismissed a new trial against Bout, removing a key obstacle to his long-awaited extradition.

Abhisit said he wished that Thailand was not in the "difficult position" of deciding Bout's fate, implying that just because courts have cleared the way for the extradition does not mean that it will necessarily happen.

Bout, a 43-year-old former Soviet Air Force officer, is reputed to be one of the world's most prolific arms dealers. His March 2008 arrest in Bangkok as part of a U.S.-led sting operation raised Washington's hopes of a speedy trial, but the case put Bangkok in the middle of a

diplomatic tussle between the United States and Russia.

Abhisit said last week that once the case worked its way through the courts, he would have the final say about Bout's extradition. He stressed in his latest comments that the entire government would decide.

"When it comes time for the executive branch of the government to decide, the Cabinet will meet. This will be the Cabinet's and not the prime minister's decision and responsibility," he said, without specifying when the meeting would take place.

Russia says Bout is an innocent businessman and wants him in Moscow. Experts say Bout has knowledge of Russia's military and intelligence operations and that Moscow does not want him going on trial in the United States.

"The government will do its best to reduce the impact [of the case] on our international relations," Abhisit told reporters in Brussels after meeting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the sidelines of an Asian-European Union summit. "The government's decision will be based on national security and the good intergovernmental relations we have. We don't want any misunderstanding."

Abhisit returns to Thailand on Friday, which is the earliest day Bout could be extradited.

A Thai Appeals Court gave its approval Aug. 20 for Bout's extradition to face trial on four terrorism-related charges that could land him in prison for life. It said the extradition must take place within 90 days, or roughly by Nov. 20. 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 accusing Bout of money laundering and wire fraud, to ensure that he wasn't set free.

On Tuesday, the Bangkok Criminal Court dismissed the second set of charges on grounds of insufficient evidence.

The court said prosecutors who filed the charges on behalf of the United States have the right to appeal within 72 hours — or by Friday — after which time Bout could be extradited. Prosecutors were not expected to appeal.

In Moscow, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement Tuesday calling Bout's detention an "obvious injustice" stemming from "political pressure on Bangkok from the outside."

"We hope that the Thai authorities will muster courage and take an unbiased position on Viktor Bout's case, so that our fellow citizen has a chance to return to his home country," the statement said.

U.S. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told reporters that the United States believes Bout will be extradited quickly after Thai officials observe a waiting period mandated by law.

"We look forward to having Viktor Bout in a prison near us very soon," Crowley said.

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