

Suspected Arms Dealer Bout Extradited to U.S.

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Thailand extradited suspected Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout to the United States to face terrorism charges Tuesday, ending a two-year wrangle between the two old Cold War foes.

The 43-year-old former Soviet air force officer, dubbed the "Merchant of Death," was flown out of Bangkok on a small, chartered U.S. aircraft shortly after Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his cabinet cleared the extradition.

Bout had been fighting extradition since his March 2008 arrest in Bangkok in a U.S.-led sting operation.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said earlier Bout faced a politically motivated extradition that could undermine strengthening U.S.-Russian ties and undo the White House's efforts to "reset" relations.

In a surprise move, the Thai cabinet officially acknowledged the U.S. extradition request, clearing the last hurdle for Bout's departure to face trial in a U.S. court.

Bout faces U.S. accusations of trafficking arms since the 1990s to dictators and conflict zones in Africa, South America and the Middle East.

Dozens of policemen and masked commandos guarded the entrance of Bangkok's maximum-security Bangkwang prison where Bout had been detained.

He was taken from prison in a speeding van with darkened windows, escorted by several security vehicles.

A court had cleared the way for Bout's extradition but the executive branch could have blocked it if it had been deemed detrimental to foreign relations or harmful to the individuals involved.

"The cabinet acknowledges the appeal court's judgment that the case was not a political one so we did not oppose his extradition," Deputy Prime Minister Trirong Suwannakhiri told Reuters.

Bout's lawyer said he had been informed his client had been sent to the United States and he would continue to fight the case. The cabinet's decision was a violation of "due process" as a request for a retrial for Bout was pending, he said.

Bout, who has long evaded UN and U.S. sanctions aimed at blocking his finances and restricting his travels, had called the charges against him an "American fantasy," insisting he was an innocent businessman.

A top security Thai official said he doubted Bout's extradition would damage relations with Russia.

"It's a political dilemma for Thailand but we have to stick to due court process," said Thawil Pliensee, secretary-general of the National Security Council. "I think Russia will understand."

There was no immediate reaction from Russia. A U.S. embassy spokesman declined to comment.

Bout, an inspiration for the Hollywood movie, "Lord of War," starring Nicholas Cage, had been held in prison since his arrest in 2008 at a luxury Bangkok hotel in a joint U.S.-Thai sting operation in which agents posed as arms buyers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

The U.S. classifies the Colombian group as a terrorist organization.

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