The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bout Pleads Not Guilty in U.S. Court

November 17, 2010



Viktor Bout arriving at a New York airport late Tuesday after being flown from Bangkok on a chartered U.S. plane.

NEW YORK — Suspected arms dealer Viktor Bout pleaded not guilty before a U.S. judge and was ordered held without bail Wednesday as prosecutors said he was in U.S. custody where he belongs.

"The so-called Merchant of Death is now a federal inmate," U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara said of Bout, who was flown from Thailand to a suburban New York airport Tuesday. "No one is beyond the reach of the law."

Bout, 43, a former air cargo executive, faces charges that he supported terrorists trying to overthrow the government of Colombia and shared their hatred for Americans.

"No one should ever think he can plot to kill Americans with impunity," Bharara said.

Bout, who wore a brown shirt and black sweatpants, pleaded not guilty through his lawyer, Sabrina Shroff, and spoke politely as he answered the judge's questions.

At one point, Bout was asked whether a financial affidavit he signed was accurate. He replied, "Yes, I swear," through an interpreter, standing and raising his hand as if swearing to tell the truth.

The judge ordered him detained without bail while awaiting his next court appearance, which was set for Jan. 10.

Prosecutors also announced the unsealing of a July 2008 guilty plea by Andrew Smulian, another defendant in the case. Bharara said Smulian admitted that he conspired with Bout to carry out a weapons deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. He is cooperating with the U.S. government.

For several months, U.S. and Russian officials had battled for control of Bout, flexing muscles in a manner that seemed to threaten cooperation on arms control, nuclear weapons curbs and the war in Afghanistan.

In one high-profile meeting in Hanoi last month, a former U.S. official said, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that Russia's cooperation on anti-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan might be curtailed unless Bout was freed.

U.S. President Barack Obama's administration insisted that its efforts to rebuild relations with Moscow could weather any turbulence caused by Bout's extradition. Department of State spokesman P.J. Crowley acknowledged possible "ripples" in relations with Moscow but added that any concerns could be managed.

That confidence could be tested as early as Saturday, when Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev attend a Russia-NATO meeting in Lisbon, Portugal.

The Manhattan indictment labels Bout an international weapons trafficker who assembled a fleet of cargo planes to transport weapons and military equipment to various failed states and to insurgents in Third World countries in Africa, South America and the Middle East from the 1990s until his arrest in Bangkok in March 2008.

Estimated to be worth $6 billion, Bout had remained in a Thai jail as his supporters fought to prevent him from landing in U.S. custody. Bout insists that he's a legitimate businessman.

In Moscow, Bout's lawyer and brother voiced alarm that U.S. officials would pressure him into incriminating himself or others. The attorney, Viktor Burobin, said the United States had already offered Bout better treatment in custody in exchange for his cooperation. And Sergei Bout, a key figure in his brother's global air cargo empire, warned that the United States would "make some kind of injections to get whatever they want out of him."

(AP, Reuters)

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