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Bout Has ‘No Secrets’ To Share

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A courtroom drawing of Bout, right, attending a hearing with his lawyer Sabrina Shroff in New York on Wednesday. **Elizabeth Williams**

BAKU, Azerbaijan — Russia has "nothing to hide" from U.S. authorities prosecuting suspected arms dealer Viktor Bout and hopes that the charges he faces get a proper hearing, a top presidential aide said Thursday.

"We have nothing to hide. Nobody sees any military secrets or any other kind of secrets here," foreign policy aide Sergei Prikhodko said in the Kremlin's most extensive comments since Bout's extradition to the United States from Thailand this week.

"It is in our interest that the investigation of this comrade be brought to completion, and he should answer all the questions the American justice system has," Prikhodko said, moderating Russia's tone after fierce criticism of Bout's extradition.

Bout could be imprisoned for life if convicted on U.S. terrorism and arms trafficking charges. There has been speculation that he operated under the protection of the Russian state.

Prikhodko called the U.S. accusations "very serious."

"We have always said and will say that narcotics dealers, human traffickers and arms traders are all the same. These people deserve unconditional condemnation," Prikhodko told reporters during a visit by President Dmitry Medvedev to Baku, Azerbaijan.

The remarks appeared aimed to keep Bout at arm's length from the Kremlin and to avoid undermining fragile improvement in relations with the United States. The comments may also be meant to convey that the Kremlin is confident his prosecution will not produce compromising information.

Bout was flown to New York on Tuesday from Thailand, where he had been the focus of a tug of war between Russia and the United States since his March 2008 arrest in a U.S.-led sting operation.

Analysts have said U.S. authorities may hope to glean information from Bout about Russia's intelligence networks and activities abroad.

Bout pleaded not guilty on Wednesday, and a judge ordered him held without bail. He is due back in Manhattan federal court for a hearing on Jan. 10.

Russia's consul in the United States said Thursday that Bout told him he had rejected an offer from U.S. authorities of unspecified "advantages" in exchange for an admission of guilt during the flight from Thailand to New York.

"Some pressure was applied in transit. In Viktor Bout's words, they tried to 'persuade' him to admit to things he did not do, promising certain advantages in return," consul Andrei Yushmanov told reporters in New York.

"Viktor Anatolyevich rejected these efforts," he said, referring to the Russian suspect by his name and patronymic.

Yushmanov did not elaborate, and it was unclear whether he was referring to a potential plea deal.

A federal public defender was named to represent Bout, but Yushmanov said Russia would help hire a lawyer "if necessary."

He said Bout's clothes, money and toiletries were taken from him by Thai authorities, and that he was given "dirty" clothes.

"We will take care to ensure Bout is provided with basic warm clothes and personal hygiene items," he said.

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