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Moscow Fumes as Pilot Jailed

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Straining relations between Russia and Tajikistan, a Tajik court ended a puzzling trial Tuesday by sentencing a Russian pilot to a lengthy 8 1/2-year prison sentence after finding him guilty of illegally crossing into the country with a smuggled jet engine.

The bewildering case has caused ripples between the two nations, and the Russian Foreign Ministry immediately lashed out at the verdict, saying it is "causing serious damage" to their relationship.

"We consider the verdict ... highly harsh and politically driven," the ministry said in a statement.

The verdict marks at least the third time this year that a Russian citizen has been tried in a foreign court in a high-profile case that has taken on distinctly political overtones.

Just last week, a U.S. court convicted Viktor Bout of arms dealing after he was arrested in Thailand and extradited to New York. In April, cargo pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko was

convicted of conspiring to smuggle drugs into the United States after being arrested by U.S. agents in Africa.

The Tajikistan case dates back to March when Russian pilot Vladimir Sadovnichy and fellow pilot Alexei Rudenko, of Estonia, made what Tajik officials said was an unscheduled landing in Kurgan-Tyube while flying two planes from Kabul, Afghanistan, to Moscow.

Tajik officials said that after the planes crossed into the country's airspace, air traffic controllers told them they did not have proper paperwork and ordered them to return to Kabul. But the pilots said they did not have enough fuel and requested permission to land, which was granted.

Once on the ground the two men — who were flying in An-72 aircraft — and eight other crew members were detained by Tajikistan's security service and accused of smuggling a nonworking, spare jet engine that was stowed on board one of the planes.

Both pilots were employed by a company called Rolkan Investmens Ltd. and were flying planes leased by Aerospace Consortium, Gazeta.ru reported.

They were on their way back from Kabul where they had been delivering food to NATO coalition forces for American supply firm Supreme Food, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

But Rolkan spokesman Viktor Pfefer explained to Gazeta.ru on Tuesday that the pilots had actually been invited to Tajikistan — where they had worked extensively with government ministries in the past — to try to negotiate new government contracts.

When they tried to land, the air traffic controllers could not find the right paperwork authorizing their arrival, but as they were running low on fuel they could not turn back, Pfefer said.

Once on the ground, Pfefer said the pilots and crew were initially cleared to leave by customs officials and were only held when the security service stepped in.

The planes were then seized, and Sadovnichy and Rudenko were held along with their crew in a Dushanbe hotel for two months. The crew members were then released and the two pilots placed under arrest.

News of their detention only filtered out in late October when their trials began. They faced up to 13 years in prison each.

Pfefer said the trial was far from fair and that the verdict seemed preordained.

"The judge just went straight to the verdict — and one-by-one said guilty to all charges," he said. "He said it had all been proved. This is complete lawlessness."

In the end, the judge found them guilty of violating Tajik airspace and smuggling the spare engine they had on board. They were initially sentenced to 10 1/2 years each, but the judge immediately slashed two years from their prison terms. The two planes — massive cargo jets capable of carrying 10 metric tons — remain in Tajik hands.

Officials with the Russian Embassy in Dushanbe vowed to do everything they could to free Sadovnichy, who plans to file an appeal.

"The verdict is not consistent with international law, is unjust and inhumane," embassy counselor Dmitry Kabaev told Reuters. "We do not agree with this verdict and we will fight for our citizens."

Estonia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the court's ruling did not seem "justified" and said Rudenko would also appeal.

"We will search for a solution bilaterally and, if necessary, in cooperation with European Union partners and Russia," the statement said.

Some observers said it seemed that larger geopolitical issues might be at play.

"The Tajikistan administration is clearly making some larger statement here," Konstantin Zatulin, a United Russia deputy on the State Duma's CIS Committee, told The Moscow Times.

"Given what has been going on in America with Viktor Bout and Tajikistan's relations with the United States, it seems there might be some connection," he said. "It's just hard to say exactly what it is at the moment, but the timing is certainly interesting."

Tajikistan is home to Russia's largest permanent military base outside the country, with the 201st Motorized Rifle Division stationed in Dushanbe. The lease for the base is due for renewal next year, leading some to suggest that the detention of the pilots may have been part of a bargaining ploy in the negotiations.

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