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Tajiks May Back Down on Pilot

By Alexandra Odynova

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Pro-Kremlin activists launching paper planes on Monday at a protest rally by Tajikistan's embassy in Moscow. **Anton Golubev**

Tajikistan appeared ready to cave in to Kremlin pressure Tuesday, as prosecutors asked a court to reduce harsh sentences against a Russian pilot jailed on murky charges last week with an Estonian colleague.

At the same time — in what looked like an attempt to save face — Tajik officials opened a case against the pilots' employer, a Russian citizen Moscow says will never be extradited.

Jailing pilots Vladimir Sadovnichy, of Russia, and, Alexei Rudenko, of Estonia, for 8 1/2 years for smuggling and illegal border crossing, was too severe, said Shokhrun Radzhabov, a spokesman for the Tajik Prosecutor General's Office.

"Taking into account the pilots' personalities and the fact that they are citizens of Tajikistan's strategic partners, the prosecution requests the regional court to mitigate punishments," Radzhabov said Tuesday, Interfax reported.

He did not say what punishment prosecutors would consider fair.

But while signaling that they were ready to back down on the internationally charged case, Tajik prosecutors also officially requested that Moscow detain the pilots' employer, Sergei Poluyanov, Interfax reported.

His company, Rolkan Investmens Ltd., owns the two An-72 planes the men were piloting before their arrest. Prosecutors called him a suspected accomplice and organizer in the crime.

A separate case against him was opened back in August, but stayed stalled until recently.

Poluyanov's whereabouts remained unclear, and he could not be reached for comment Tuesday. The Russian Constitution bans extradition of Russian citizens, though authorities sometimes choose to overlook this rule.

The case dates back to March, when Sadovnichy and Rudenko were returning in separate planes to Moscow from a NATO supply mission in Afghanistan, with a refueling stop scheduled at a Tajik airport.

Local air traffic controllers at first refused them permission to land over a paperwork problem, but acquiesced when the pilots requested an emergency landing because they were running out of fuel. Once on the ground, they were arrested by Tajik law enforcement officials, who accused them of smuggling a spare, non-working jet engine on board one of the planes.

Some analysts suggested that the case was fabricated as a show of power by Dushanbe to the country's populace. Other reports speculated that Tajik authorities wanted to seize the planes or pressure Moscow into releasing an in-law of Tajikistan President Emomali Rakhmon, who is jailed in Russia on drug-smuggling charges.

Russian officials seemed to have ignored the case for months but mounted a crackdown after the trial started. A heated campaign in state media was accompanied by a hunt on Tajik migrants, some 300 of whom were rounded up in Moscow streets and prepared for deportation.

The first batch of some dozen Tajiks was expelled from the country on Tuesday, the day after President Dmitry Medvedev insisted that the hunt had no link to the pilots' case.

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