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Russia Should Redouble Efforts to Clear Jailed Arms Dealer, Wife Says

By Alexander Winning

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Russian authorities should redouble their efforts to clear the name of convicted arms dealer Viktor Bout, who is currently serving a 25-year sentence in a high-security U.S. prison on charges Moscow calls political, his wife said.

"The case against Viktor is nothing more than wild guesses and fabrication," Alla Bout said at a news conference Friday, calling on the government to provide financial support to cover the "huge" costs of defending her husband.

Dubbed the "Merchant of Death" for his reputation for facilitating arms shipments in conflict zones in the 1990s, Viktor Bout was sentenced by a New York court in April last year for conspiring to sell up to $20 million in sophisticated weaponry to Colombian rebels intending to attack U.S. troops.

Thai authorities extradited him to the U.S. in 2010 after a sting operation in Bangkok two

years earlier, when U.S. prosecutors say Bout, who speaks several foreign languages fluently and first worked in Africa as a translator for the Soviet army, agreed to sell weapons including surface-to-air missiles to U.S. agents posing as rebels with the guerrilla organization FARC.

Bout denies all charges against him and says he is a legitimate businessman. His conviction, which was appealed by Bout's U.S. lawyer Albert Dayan in January, has strained relations between Moscow and Washington.

On Friday, Alla Bout said her husband's case was "without precedent," urging the Foreign Ministry to take a more active stance in pressuring U.S. prosecutors into reconsidering the charges against her 46-year-old spouse.

"Viktor Bout ran a fleet of planes flying cargo across African flashpoints. That's an entirely normal business. There's no documentary evidence that he ever trafficked arms," said Alexei Binetsky, Bout's new Russian lawyer, who has been hired to provide additional legal support from Moscow.

"What's more, the amount of weapons that Viktor is supposed to have offered to U.S. agents would have been impossible to gather in such a short space of time," said Binetsky, who wore silver-tinted sunglasses to the indoor event.

Binetsky said "an extremely influential person" stood behind Bout's conviction and lengthy prison sentence, describing the Illinois jail where he is serving out his sentence as "monstrous."

Asked to clarify who could have swayed the outcome of his client's trial, he said Bout had dozens of business rivals in the U.S. and Russia who would have wanted to weaken his grip on the market for airlifting cargo across Africa and the Middle East.

"Viktor Bout is a talented and honest businessman," Binetsky said, stressing that Bout had no criminal record prior to the New York court ruling. "That's a factor that should also be taken into account when examining the evidence against him."

Pointing in the direction of reporters, Alla Bout slammed Western media for waging a "propaganda war" before and after his trial. She called reports that Russia could blacklist U.S. officials involved in prosecuting her husband in response to the recently published Magnitsky list "political speculation" that could hinder his appeal.

Binetsky said he would on Monday refile a $1 million compensation claim in Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court against private TV station Ren-TV over its portrayal of Viktor Bout in a documentary titled "Mafia of the Country of the Soviets."

Russian officials have long sought Bout's extradition so that he can serve out the remainder of his prison term on home soil but have been rebuffed by the U.S. side. The Foreign Ministry says the issue remains a sticking point in U.S.-Russian ties.

In an interview broadcast on the international Russian-language channel RTVi last week, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that U.S. agents had forcefully extracted incriminating evidence from Bout "in a deceitful way."

"There's a host of deficiencies with the U.S. legal system," Lavrov said.

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