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U.S. Goes After $300 Million in Alleged Bribes Paid by Russian Telecoms Giants

By The Moscow Times

June 30, 2015

The U.S. has filed to seize $300 million that it claims was paid in bribes by two major Russian telecoms firms to a close relative of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in exchange for access to the Uzbek telecoms market, news agency Bloomberg reported Tuesday.

The complaint filed by the U.S. Justice Department in a Manhattan federal court on Monday claims that leading Russian mobile phone operator MTS and fellow telecoms major VimpelCom — owned in part by Russian billionaire Mikhail Fridman — bribed a relative of Karimov's, the report said.

The complaint refers to the relative only as "Government Official A," but identifies the individual as the beneficial owner of the Gibraltar-based firm Takilant and two other shell companies.

The Financial Times reported last year that Takilant is believed to have connections with Karimov's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova.

The two Russian telecoms firms “understood they were required to enter into lucrative contracts with Government Official A's shell companies in order to enter the Uzbek telecommunications market,” Bloomberg cited the complaint as saying.

Karimova has been the subject of international corruption investigations since 2012, when a television documentary claimed that Swedish telecoms group TeliaSonera had paid Takilant $320 million in exchange for 3G network licenses and frequencies in Uzbekistan.

Takilant held a minority stake in VimpelCom's Uzbek subsidiary from 2007 to 2009, Bloomberg reported last year. VimpelCom said in March last year that its Amsterdam headquarters had been raided by Dutch prosecutors in connection with the international bribery investigation.

Representatives of MTS and VimpelCom did not respond to Bloomberg's requests for comment. The assets that the U.S. is seeking are held by the Bank of New York Mellon in Ireland, Luxembourg and Belgium, the report said, citing the court complaint.

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