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U.S. Wins Case to Seize $300 Million in Alleged Bribes by Russian Telecoms Giants

By The Moscow Times

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U.S. Justice Department officials claim that Russian mobile phone operators MTS and VimpelCom paid more than $500 million in bribes.

The U.S. Justice Department has won the right to impound $300 million that it claims was paid in bribes by two major Russian telecoms firms to a close relative of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, news agency Bloomberg reported Friday.

Justice Department officials claim that leading Russian mobile phone operator MTS and fellow telecoms giant VimpelCom paid more than $500 million in bribes to shell companies owned by the relative in exchange for access to the Uzbek telecoms market, Bloomberg reported.

The U.S. says the money was channeled to the Uzbek president's relative through bogus

consulting contracts and a network of shell companies, the report said.

A Manhattan court ruled on Thursday that the Justice Department could seize the funds, which are held by the Bank of New York Mellon in Ireland, Luxembourg and Belgium and Clearstream Banking accounts in Luxembourg, the report said.

The Justice Department's complaint refers to Karimov's relative only as “Government Official A,” but identifies them as the beneficial owner of Gibraltar-based firm Takilant and two other shell companies, according to Bloomberg.

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

Karimova has been under international investigation for corruption 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 owned 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.

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