

Bout Appeals to Thai Prime Minister

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BANGKOK — Suspected Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout appealed to Thailand's prime minister on Monday to block his extradition to the United States, arguing that neither a fair trial nor his safety could be guaranteed there.

The appeal adds a new twist to a diplomatic tug of war that has turned into a geopolitical spat between the United States and Russia over the fate of the man dubbed the "Merchant of Death," who has been behind bars in Bangkok since his arrest in a Thai-U.S. sting operation in 2008.

A Thai appeals court on Aug. 20 overturned last year's lower court verdict that found no grounds to extradite Bout to the United States. The latest decision outraged Russia, which accused Thailand of bowing to pressure from Washington.

"[Bout] is appealing to the Thai government that he could be in physical danger and would not receive a fair trial in the U.S.," his lawyer, Lak Nittiwattanawichan, said after delivering an 11-page handwritten petition for Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Bout's extradition has been delayed over what Thai authorities say are legal complications

stemming from the U.S. filing of additional charges against the 43-year-old former Soviet Air Force officer a few hours ahead of the latest verdict. The United States has asked Thai prosecutors to withdraw the charges.

The case and the petition raise new doubts on whether Bout will be brought to trial at all and risks deepening a dispute between Russia and the United States, both of which Thailand relies on for exports, investment, tourism and military procurements.

The court said Bout must be released if the extradition does not take place in three months.

Sirisak Tiyyapan, director of international affairs at the Thai prosecutor's office, said a request would be made to withdraw U.S. charges of wire fraud and money laundering, but declined to comment on the time frame.

"Thailand is caught between two superpowers, so the best we could do is stick to the laws," Sirisak said.

Bout faces U.S. accusations of trafficking arms since the 1990s to dictators and conflict zones in Africa, South America and the Middle East, which he denies.

According to the U.S. indictment, Bout told undercover agents in Bangkok that he could supply them with 700 to 800 surface-to-air missiles, 5,000 AK-47 assault rifles, millions of rounds of ammunition, C-4 explosives, landmines and unmanned aerial drones.

"I am not guilty of the crimes I am accused of, and I continue to believe that justice will prevail in my case," Bout said in a statement Friday read by his wife, Alla, at a news conference. He is in a high-security prison in a Bangkok suburb.

He has repeatedly denied being an arms dealer, though he acknowledges that the air transport company he once ran did carry legally authorized shipments of weapons.

"The U.S. is trying to create for me the image of an illegal billionaire and an illegal arms dealer," Bout said in his statement. "I have never traded in weapons; I have never sold weapons."

(Reuters, AP)

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