

Thai Prime Minister Has Last Say on Bout

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BANGKOK — Thailand's prime minister said Thursday that he would have the final say in the politically sensitive extradition of suspected Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout to the United States, noting that one side is bound to be disappointed.

Bout, a 43-year-old former Soviet Air Force officer, is reputed to be one of the world's most prolific arms dealers. He has been jailed in Bangkok since March 2008 when a U.S.-led sting operation ended a lengthy search for him. Washington had expected Bout's rapid extradition, but the case spurred a diplomatic tug of war with Moscow that led to long delays. Bout's next hearing is scheduled for Monday.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva noted that the case is still working its way through the courts but that he will be the final arbiter.

"Ultimately, the decision lies with the executive branch," he said. "We have to take cooperation, international relations and the country's interests into account, but there is no silver bullet."

Asked whether he was concerned about the outcome, he replied, "Definitely."

"A decision for one side means the other party is bound to be dissatisfied, but we have to try to follow the rules and spend time making them understand and minimizing the impact."

The Bangkok Criminal Court in August 2009 rejected an initial U.S. extradition request in a ruling that stunned Washington. The United States responded by requesting an appeal but also filed new charges against Bout to keep him detained in case the lower court's ruling was upheld.

An appeals court overturned that ruling on Aug. 20 this year, clearing the way for his extradition. But the additional charges have caused a legal bottleneck because Bout cannot leave Thailand until the charges are cleared.

The United States has requested the extra charges of money laundering and wire fraud be dropped, and the Bangkok Criminal Court will rule Monday on whether it agrees to do that.

However, under Thai law a defendant has the right to object to charges against him being dropped. That means Bout could object to dropping the charges as a way to stall his extradition, a stance that his lawyer has said he will take.

Earlier this week, U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner reiterated Washington's hope to see Bout on U.S. soil.

"The Thai courts have approved the extradition of Viktor Bout to face trial on serious terrorism-related charges. This ruling was carried out in accordance with Thai law and with our bilateral extradition treaty," he said. "Now that the Appeals Court has issued its ruling, we look forward to timely extradition of Mr. Bout in accordance with Thailand's treaty obligations."

Bout is accused of supplying weapons that fueled civil wars in South America, the Middle East and Africa, with clients including Liberia's Charles Taylor, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and both sides of the civil war in Angola.

The head of a lucrative air transport empire, Bout long evaded UN and U.S. sanctions aimed at blocking his financial activities and restricting his travel. He has denied any involvement in illicit activities and said he ran a legitimate business.

His high-profile arrest in a 2008 U.S.-led sting operation in Bangkok ended a global chase for Bout.

Experts say Bout has knowledge of Russia's military and intelligence operations and Moscow does not want him to go on trial in the United States.

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