

Bout's Lawyers in U.S. Blame Politics

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NEW YORK — Lawyers for Russian businessman Viktor Bout, extradited to the United States to face charges that he conspired to sell weapons to a terrorist group, say the case should be thrown out because the U.S. used extreme political pressure to force Thailand to turn him over.

In papers filed late Friday and Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Manhattan, the lawyers said the case against Bout was brought for "purely political reasons" after authorities realized the U.S. military continued hiring Bout's companies to supply U.S. soldiers in Iraq even after he was banned in July 2004 by the Treasury Department from doing business with the United States.

Treasury officials had cited claims Bout made \$50 million in profits from arms transfers to the Taliban when Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida were in Afghanistan.

Bout is scheduled for trial in October. He was extradited from Thailand last year after his arrest in March 2008 in a Bangkok hotel. He has pleaded not guilty and has asked that charges against him be dismissed.

The Russian government has complained that his extradition was unlawful and political.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. prosecutors' office, Carly Sullivan, declined to comment Tuesday.

The defense lawyers said one Bout front company was estimated to have made about 1,000 flights into U.S.-controlled air bases in Iraq by the end of 2004. They said the U.S. military gave at least 1.9 million liters of free airplane fuel to Bout's pilots and U.S. government contractors paid Bout-controlled companies roughly \$60 million to fly supplies into Iraq.

They said the United States decided to go after Bout following embarrassing disclosures of incompetence "or worse" in the Defense Department and State Department.

The lawyers said it was unclear whether the motivation for the pursuit of Bout was payback for the embarrassment he had caused the U.S. government or to create a scapegoat to deflect attention from "the government's unseemly relationship" with him.

The scheme to capture Bout was created in late 2007, when U.S. authorities began a campaign dubbed Operation Relentless to offer Bout a huge arms deal to men posing as members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization operating in Colombia, the lawyers noted.

The lawyers said that a court in Thailand first found Bout was not extraditable to the United States under a treaty between the countries.

"But after more than a year of persistent and extreme political pressure exerted on the Thai government by the United States, a Thai appeals court ultimately reversed the lower court decision and ordered extradition," the lawyers wrote.

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