

US takes extraordinary steps to extradite alleged Russian arms dealer

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The Russian government has condemned the extradition of Viktor Bout from Thailand to the United States on Tuesday. Washington alleges that Bout, a Russian citizen, has been an international arms dealer since the 1990s.

In 2008, the US Department of Justice charged Bout with conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization. He is also accused of fraud and money laundering. If convicted of the charges being pressed by US authorities, Bout faces life imprisonment.

Washington has pursued Bout's extradition since he was arrested in Bangkok in a joint operation between local police and the US Drug Enforcement Agency, who claim he had traveled to Thailand to set up an arms deal with the Columbian FARC guerilla group.

The Bangkok deal turned out to be a sting operation involving US agents and a former business partner of Bout. He has been in a Thai prison since his arrest in March 2008. His transfer to US custody comes after months of pressure from Washington on the Thai government.

Repeated US attempts to have Bout handed over to its custody were rebuffed by legal challenges from Bout's lawyers, backed by political pressure on Thai authorities from the Kremlin. A major stumbling block for the US is that Thailand does not categorize FARC as a terrorist organization, a fact that prompted US prosecutors to add the additional charges of money laundering and fraud this year.

An August appeal court ruling in Thailand allowed Bout to be extradited to the US. However, the process was delayed while the charges laid by American prosecutors were reviewed. Showing characteristic contempt for the sovereignty of Thailand, a long-time US ally in the region, Washington strong-armed the

Thai government to circumvent this judicial process.

Bout was flown out of Bangkok on a private charter jet just hours after Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced that his government backed the August court ruling. It appears the Bout was transferred from prison to the airport and out the country so quickly that his wife, who resides in Thailand, and his lawyer did not know of the extradition.

In a breach of international protocol, the Russian embassy in Bangkok was not informed of the extradition.

Speaking to Rossiya TV on Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented, "Contrary to two rulings by a Thai criminal court which concluded that Viktor Bout's guilt was not proven, he has still—by a decision of the Thai government—been extradited to the United States."

"I consider this to be unprecedented political pressure on the judicial process and on the government of Thailand. This whole story is an example of blatant injustice. We, as a state, will continue to render all necessary assistance to Viktor Bout as a Russian citizen," Lavrov continued.

The *New York Times* has reported that Moscow offered to sell Thailand oil at a discounted price if Bout was released to Russian authorities.

It is widely reported that Bout has enjoyed close relations with the Russian state since the 1990s, when he established an air freight company using ex-Soviet aircraft bought in sweetheart deals from the armed forces. He had served as a translator in the armed services during the Soviet period.

In addition to alleged links to FARC, there are claims that Bout supplied armed groups in the Middle East, Bosnia and Afghanistan. His alleged dealings with African governments and rebel groups made him the

subject of the fictionalized 2005 film *Lord of War* starring Nicholas Cage.

The BBC's Moscow correspondent reports sources claiming that Bout enjoyed "support from many different parts of the Russian state...in particular the secret services."

It appears likely that the Kremlin fears that Bout will trade information on covert Russian operations, potentially implicating the highest echelons of the government, for a lighter sentence from his US captors.

Despite the recent attempt by the two powers to collaborate in Afghanistan and on the question of Iran's nuclear program—the so-called "reset" policy—the US pursuit of Bout expresses the ongoing tensions with Russia.

In June, Moscow and Washington largely brushed aside the exposure of the Russian spy ring in the US.

However, the refusal of US authorities to cooperate with the Kremlin over Bout's extradition, and Lavrov's subsequent public criticisms, points to the strains beneath the surface of their temporary rapprochement.

The vigor with which Bout's extradition has been pursued by the Department of Justice indicates that Washington has an interest in Bout beyond his alleged willingness to supply arms to FARC rebels.

If even some of the many accusations leveled against him are correct, Bout is likely to have intimate knowledge of the crimes committed by the major powers and their local proxies across the globe, making him a valuable prize for both Washington and Moscow.

His company provided logistical support to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, although American officials later claimed they did not know that the planes belonged to Bout.

Such claims have no credibility. It is a matter of record that Bout was a known and trusted supplier of logistical support to US imperialism and its allies. In 1999, Bout's company flew materiel from Royal Air Force bases in Britain to supply US-led NATO occupation forces in Kosovo.

Bout is also alleged to have supplied arms to several groups in Afghanistan in the 1990s. As well as supplying the Northern Alliance, Bout is suspected of providing arms to the Taliban, whose attempts to gain control of the country at that time had Washington's blessing.

According to author Douglas Farah, co-author of the book *Merchant of Death*, Bout's air freight company was "very adept" at flying "UN peacekeeping troops, US military into Iraq, British aid workers."

"There will be a lot of people in Russia who will be very nervous and probably a few in other countries, the United States and Great Britain particularly, where he had contracts for work that he shouldn't have been doing for a long period of time," Farah told French broadcaster RFI.



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