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Thailand rejects US plea to extradite Russian arms dealer

Viktor Bout was allegedly trying to buy weapons for Colombia's Farc rebels when arrested in Bangkok

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A US request to extradite the notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout to face terrorism charges was rejected by a Thai court today.

The Russian, nicknamed "the merchant of death", has been held in a maximum-security prison in Bangkok since his arrest there in March last year during a sting operation by US agents.

The US said it was "disappointed and mystified" by today's ruling. It has 72 hours to appeal against the ruling, during which time Bout will remain in detention. If the US does not appeal, he will be set free.

Also known as "the embargo buster", Bout was allegedly attempting to procure weapons for US agents masquerading as Farc rebels from Colombia when he was arrested. He was charged with conspiring to sell millions of dollars in illegal arms to Farc, which is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by America.

Delivering the verdict at Bangkok's criminal court today, judge Jittakorn Wattanasin said: "The US charges are not applicable under Thai law. This is a political case. The Farc is fighting for a political cause and is not a criminal gang. Thailand does not recognise the Farc as a terrorist group."

US agents had been pursuing Bout for months before they orchestrated the swoop in a Bangkok hotel room after he had flown in from Moscow. "We're disappointed and mystified by the lower court ruling," said James Entwistle, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Thailand. "We will consult the Thai government."

Some analysts suspect Bout has links to Russian intelligence, making him valuable to US authorities.

Relations between the US and Russia reached a cold war low in the last year of George Bush's presidency, which Barack Obama has been attempting to remedy. But in February, Russia's foreign ministry described the US attempt to secure Bout's extradition as "embarrassing" and "perplexing", concluding that the move was politically motivated.

Bout's wife, Alla, commended the judge for not being swayed by diplomatic ties. "I am very happy as the US government has strong political influence in Thailand," she told reporters. "The judge showed professionalism in this case."

Bout, 42, became notorious in the 1990s when he was accused of illegally smuggling arms to numerous African regimes and conflicts. The United Nations has accused him of arming the former Liberian president Charles Taylor, who is currently on trial for war crimes, as well as rebels in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

According to UN reports, Bout's alleged arms smuggling network included more than 50 aircraft around the world. A 2005 report by Amnesty International alleged he was "the most prominent foreign businessman" involved in trafficking arms to UN-embargoed destinations from Bulgaria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and other countries.

His activities were chronicled in a book, *Merchant of Death*, published in 2007 by two US investigative journalists. Bout was also the reported inspiration for a 2005 film, *Lord of War*, in which Nicholas Cage played a cynical arms dealer.

Bout has admitted working for his "very close friend" Jean-Pierre Bemba, a warlord who became the vice-president of Congo and is now in The Hague awaiting trial for orchestrating rape, mass murder and the use of child soldiers. Bout has suggested the charges against Bemba are trumped up.

Bout has also been accused of arming the Taliban. However, his supposed client list is not limited to notorious warlords; it includes American, British, French and Russian customers. In October 2006, Bush issued an executive order freezing assets belonging to Bout and several associates, and barring Americans from doing business with them.

Bout claims to be bankrupt, although one estimate puts his wealth at \$6bn (£3.65bn). He has repeatedly denied allegations of wrongdoing.

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