November 16, 2010

Russian Arrives in U.S. to Face Arms Charges

By SETH MYDANS

BANGKOK — Thailand extradited Viktor Bout, a Russian accused of arms trafficking, to the United States on Tuesday, abandoning the diplomatic balancing act it had conducted for more than two years between Washington and Moscow.

Two motorcades — one apparently a decoy — made the trip to Don Muang Airport, where about 50 police officers, including snipers, kept watch, according to local news media.

Shortly afterward, an airport official confirmed that Mr. Bout had left on a chartered 20-seat American aircraft. Also aboard were two pilots and six officials from the United States Drug Enforcement Administration.

Mr. Bout arrived at Westchester County Airport outside New York City on Tuesday evening, according to a Justice Department statement. He was being taken to the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Lower Manhattan, and will be held there pending his arraignment in United States District Court in Manhattan on Wednesday.

Mr. Bout, 43, is a former Soviet Air Force officer who became known as the “Merchant of Death” for what American officials say is an arms trafficking network that encompassed Africa, Afghanistan and South America. He is also reputed to know the current shape of Russian intelligence, and Washington has been in a tug of war with Moscow since his arrest in March 2008 over whether he would go on trial in the United States.

Mr. Bout was arrested at a Bangkok hotel after he agreed, the authorities said, to sell millions of dollars in weapons to undercover American agents posing as rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry has said Mr. Bout is an innocent businessman, as he himself claims.
On Tuesday, the ministry released a statement calling the extradition illegal. “From a legal perspective, what has occurred cannot have a rational explanation and justification,” the statement said. “There is no doubt that the illegal extradition of Viktor Bout came about as a consequence of unprecedented political pressure exerted by the U.S. on the government and judicial authorities of Thailand. It is deeply regrettable that the Thai authorities succumbed to political pressure from outside and undertook the illegal extradition.”

Thailand had long tried not to offend either Russia or the United States over Mr. Bout’s case. In October, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva urged the two to resolve the issue on their own.

“We have certainly indicated that they should talk, rather than putting all the burden on us,” he said.

But on Tuesday, it appeared that Thailand had whisked Mr. Bout to the airport without informing the Russians.

“This information did not arrive at the embassy officially,” the chief of the Russian Embassy’s consular service, Andrei Dvornikov, told the Interfax news agency. “There were neither notes nor telephone calls.”

Mr. Bout’s Thai lawyer said that the Thai authorities had not informed him; Mr. Bout’s wife, Alla; or the Russian Embassy in Bangkok about the move.

“Alla Bout and I were so confused and shocked since they didn’t inform us about the extradition,” said the lawyer, Lak Nittiwattanawichan. “We just learned about this late in the morning. Yesterday, we went to visit him at the prison and everything was normal.”

He said that he would sue because the “Thai authorities have violated the law.”

Clifford J. Levy contributed reporting from Moscow, Benjamin Weiser from New York, and Poypiti Amatatham from Bangkok.