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NEWS ARTICLE

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Arms suspect Bout turns to PM to stop extradition

Suspected Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout has sought help from Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to block his extradition to the US. Mr Bout made the request in an 11-page, hand-written letter submitted through his lawyer Lak Nittiwattanawichan to an official at Government House yesterday.

“We want the prime minister to provide security because there may be threats [in jail],” Mr Lak told reporters. “We oppose the extradition because the process is not being done according to the law. Mr Bout will not receive justice in the United States and he will not be safe there.”

Mr Abhisit said he had not received the letter but he had already ordered better security for Mr Bout. The prime minister denied on his weekly talk show that there had been any political interference in the legal proceedings involving Mr Bout. Mr Bout, 43, faces a maximum sentence of life in prison if convicted in the U.S. on charges including conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals and to provide material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization. He has rejected the charges and said he ran a legitimate air cargo business.

Mr Bout’s extradition to the U.S. on terrorism charges, ordered by the Appeal Court on Aug 20 but strongly opposed by Russia, has been delayed because he is facing other charges on money laundering and frauds.

The U.S. on Aug 23 officially asked Thailand through the Foreign Affairs Ministry to drop the new charges. The request was sent from the ministry to the Office of the Attorney-General, according to Sirisak Tiyaphan, director for international affairs at the OAG.

The OAG will decide whether the charges should be withdrawn and forward its decision to the Criminal Court. The court will have the final say.

The U.S. sent a jet with U.S. Marshals Service staff on board to Bangkok on Aug 23 to pick up Mr Bout. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya said in Montenegro that the U.S. decision to send an aircraft to Bangkok to pick up Mr Bout was inappropriate. “I talked with the U.S. embassy in Bangkok last week saying that sending a jet to Don Muang air force base to receive Mr Bout was inappropriate because it [the U.S.] should respect our internal processes,” Mr Kasit said.

“Both countries should respect each other’s judicial processes as well as the prestige of Thailand. The U.S. should not do anything which is deemed as pressuring us as it is not good for our prestige and honor. It must respect our sovereignty and legal processes. “Everything requires its own steps to proceed. It should not be accelerated or pressured. The issue is what friends should not do.”

The foreign minister called on the U.S. and Russia to hold bilateral talks to resolve the matter instead of using Thailand as a stage for their battle for Mr Bout. Moscow has voiced “extreme disappointment” in the planned extradition.