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Reuters

Russia jails two men for giving China nuke secrets

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Russia has jailed two university professors for passing top secret information on Moscow's next generation nuclear missile system to China, sentencing each of them to at least 12 years in jail, local media reported on Wednesday.

Russian investigators said the two professors - who worked at a St Petersburg university - had travelled to China in 2009 "where they gave classified information to representatives of Chinese military intelligence for money," state news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The information they are said to have divulged included the specifications of Russia's Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missile, which after a series of troubled tests is meant to become the cornerstone of the country's nuclear arsenal.

Investigators said that Chinese intelligence officials had also asked for information about other nuclear missile systems such as the Topol-M and the Iskander, Interfax reported.

The two professors, named as Yevgeny Afanasyev and Svyatoslav Bobyshev, were arrested in 2010 and pleaded not guilty to the charges, but a Russian court did not believe them.

"The court has sentenced Afanasyev to punishment in the form of a jail term of 12 years and six months ... and Bobyshev ... to punishment of 12 years," the presiding judge said.

Russia has worked hard to forge closer trade relations with China, but has watched nervously as its southern neighbor has strengthened its military on the back of an economic boom.

Last year, less than a week before Vladimir Putin, then the prime minister, travelled to China, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said it had detained a suspected undercover Chinese spy trying to gain access to missile technology.

The FSB said the man, Tun Shenyun, had been trying to buy sensitive material on a Russian anti-aircraft missile system while working under the guise of a translator for official delegations.

The Committee for the Defence of Scientists - an organization set up to combat what it says is an FSB witch hunt against academics - called the convicted professors "victims of spy mania".

The judge in the case said that the information they were convicted of selling could be used in a system to detect Russian submarines, from which the Bulava is launched.

Russia plans on sending some of its Bulava-carrying Borei submarines to serve in its Pacific Fleet near the border with China when the next-generation craft are introduced into service.

China buys far less military hardware from Russia than in the past, but Russian analysts have accused Beijing of copying aspects of some of the higher-end Russian military technology, including parts of the new T-50 stealth fighter.

Lawyers for the professors said the two intended to appeal their conviction, RIA reported.