

Testimony Ends in Bout's Weapons Trial in U.S.

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NEW YORK — The U.S. government has completed presenting evidence in the weapons dealing case against Russian businessman Viktor Bout, and defense lawyers called no witnesses, setting the stage for closing arguments this week.

Prosecutors finished Friday with two witnesses who testified that they saw Bout in the 1990s watching planes being loaded with weapons and soldiers in East Africa for a trip to the Congo.

The testimony seemed meant to buttress the government's portrayal of Bout as a powerful international weapons dealer who eagerly stepped into a 2008 sting operation arranged by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In the sting, the focus of the trial in Manhattan federal court, two DEA operatives posed as anti-American rebels who wanted to buy weapons from Bout for use in Colombia.

One of those operatives, Ricardo Jardenero, testified Friday that he was introduced to Bout at a March 2008 meeting in a Bangkok hotel as "the Commandant," a commanding officer of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. He testified that Bout drew a picture of a

surface-to-air missile to demonstrate a weapon that might be effective against U.S. pilots.

After the meeting, Bout was arrested and held in Thai prisons until he was extradited to the United States for trial last year over the objections of Russia.

Jardenero, the government's final witness, came immediately after two witnesses testified that they saw Bout overseeing weapons shipments in Africa in 1998.

James Roberts, who lives in Africa, testified that he was working for Bout as a pilot in fall 1998 when he saw weapons, ammunition and rocket-propelled grenades being loaded onto planes by soldiers in military uniforms. On one occasion, he said, he saw Bout on the runway near the aircraft. Another time, he said, he watched 200 to 300 soldiers go onto a plane destined for the Congo.

Charles Mukoto, of East Africa, testified that he saw Bout on many occasions in East Africa "supervising" the movement of cargo that included high-powered assault rifles, small tanks and mortars. He said he also saw soldiers boarding planes and Bout meeting with senior military officials.

As defense lawyers objected to efforts by prosecutors to elicit more testimony about the soldiers who boarded the planes, U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin stopped Assistant U.S. Attorney Brendan McGuire from getting an answer to the question: "What, if anything, were the soldiers carrying?"

"Obviously they weren't carrying pens," defense attorney Albert Dayan said.

The lawyer has maintained that Bout was a legitimate businessman who did not know what was contained in the shipments he brokered before the United Nations in 2004 severely restricted where he could travel, forcing a shutdown of his transport business.

After calling no witnesses, the defense asked the judge to throw out the charges on the grounds that the government had failed to prove its case, a common request defense lawyers make at trials prior to closing arguments. The judge declined.

Bout, 44, has pleaded not guilty. If convicted of conspiracy charges, he could face life in prison.

The moniker of "Merchant of Death" was attached to Bout by a high-ranking minister at Britain's Foreign Office, who had drawn attention to his 1990s notoriety for running a fleet of aging Soviet-era cargo planes to conflict-ridden hotspots in Africa.

The nickname was included in the U.S. government's indictment of Bout, and U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara referenced it when he announced Bout's extradition last year, saying: "The so-called Merchant of Death is now a federal inmate."

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