

Bout Associate Convicted in U.S. Case

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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NEW YORK — A Syrian associate of notorious international arms dealer Viktor Bout was convicted Friday of charges that he tried to make an illegal purchase of two airplanes to transport weapons to international war zones.

A jury in federal court in Manhattan also found Richard Chichakli guilty of money laundering and other charges. He is scheduled to be sentenced in March.

Bout is serving a 25-year sentence for a 2011 conviction on charges that he conspired to sell millions of dollars of weapons to rebels in Colombia. Prosecutors said Chichakli had helped Bout manage a network of aircraft companies since the mid-1990s.

Chichakli had said that his indictment was "absurd" and "crazy" and that he feared he would not get a fair trial. But he said he was determined to disprove the allegations against him. He said in 2010 that he had never worked for Bout although they had discussed business deals that never came to fruition.

"I have never done business with Viktor Bout," Chichakli said then. "I challenge anyone to prove otherwise."

His lawyer did not immediately return a telephone message or an e-mail on Friday.

In 2004, American authorities banned Bout from doing business in the U.S. because of his role in pouring arms into violent conflicts around the world. Prosecutors allege that Bout and Chichakli violated the sanctions by forming a front company that contracted to buy two Boeing airplanes.

For nearly two decades, Bout, dubbed the Merchant of Death, had built a worldwide air cargo operation, amassing a fleet of more than 60 transport planes, hundreds of companies and a multibillion-dollar fortune.

His aircraft flew from Afghanistan to Angola, carrying everything from raw minerals to gladiolas, drilling equipment to frozen fish. But, according to authorities, the network's specialty was black market arms — assault rifles, ammunition, anti-aircraft missiles, helicopter gunships and a full range of sophisticated weapons systems, almost always sourced from Russian stocks or from Eastern European factories.

In the months before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, U.S., British and United Nations authorities heard growing reports that Bout's planes and maintenance operations, then headquartered in the United Arab Emirates, were aiding the Taliban while it sheltered al-Qaida militants in Afghanistan. Bout denied that he worked with the Taliban or al-Qaida and denied ever participating in black market arms deals.

In 2008, while under economic sanctions and a UN travel ban, Bout was approached in Moscow by a close associate about supplying weapons on the black market to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

Bout was told that the group wanted to use drug trafficking proceeds to pay for surface-to-air missiles and other weapons, making it clear that it wanted to attack helicopter pilots and other Americans in Colombia, prosecutors said. He finalized the phony deal with the two DEA informants in a bugged hotel room in Bangkok in March 2008, they said.

Throughout the case, Bout maintained he was a legitimate businessman who was not selling arms when the American operatives came knocking.

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