

The Merchant of Death

From the outside, the \$3 million property in the plush, residential Sandhurst area of Johannesburg could easily have been mistaken for a detention facility. The property was surrounded by 5-meter high walls topped by electrified fences. Armed guards with machine guns and dogs patrolled the grounds, and the daily security expenses ran higher than what most South Africans made in a year. But the compound was no prison. Within the walls were all the amenities of the leisure class: two swimming pools, a luxurious guesthouse, cascading ponds and a corolla of tropical plants surrounding the main house.

On a warm afternoon in March 1998, an elderly Russian woman was cutting up fruit in the kitchen, while her daughter and son-in-law played tennis across the street. Suddenly, the idyll was destroyed by the sound of grenades blasting open the door, as armed intruders stormed in. The Russian woman grabbed a large watermelon and smashed it on the head of one of the gunmen before she was knocked unconscious by a rifle butt. Hustling across the street, her son-in-law arrived in time to confront the armed thugs, who roughed him up. The masked men fled with \$6 million dollars in cash, but left paintings and expensive artifacts untouched. A message had been sent to Victor Bout.

A short while later, a motorcycle gunman opened fire on a car carrying Bout and two associates, and another of his employees was beaten up and robbed on a Johannesburg street. Whatever the circumstances, for Bout the intent was now unmistakable. "The message was you're vulnerable so get out," said Richard Chichakli, one of his business associates. A few months later, Bout put his home up for sale.



Acopy of one of Victor Bout's many passports.

Bout, a short, stocky 35-year-old native of Tajikistan, graduated from Moscow's Military Institute of Foreign Languages and reportedly is fluent in six. He started out in business in Afghanistan when his air force regiment was disbanded during the breakup of the former Soviet Union.

According to intelligence documents, the polyglot with personal skills was able to establish working relationships with various African heads of state and rebel leaders – the late Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, Liberian President Charles Taylor, former Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko, Libyan President Moammar Gadhafi, Jean-Pierre Bemba, the leader of the Congo Liberation Front, and the former leaders of Congo-Brazzaville, among others.

Bout had access to what they wanted. The end of the Cold War resulted in a massive amount of surplus weapons and spare parts being dumped at often very low prices onto the private market. Bout had the capacity to deliver

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not only small arms, but also major weapons systems, and deliver them almost anywhere in the world. And his associates – ranging from former U.S. military personnel and Russian officials to African heads of state and organized crime figures – gave him a lengthy list of buyers and sellers with whom to do business.

He ran a maze of individuals and companies, which employed some 300 people and owned and operated 40 to 60 aircraft, including the largest private fleet of Antonov cargo planes in the world, according to an investigation by the Center for Public Integrity's International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Through his web of companies, Bout made it almost impossible to trace his activities. He leased aircraft to other individuals and companies so that he was not directly tied to illegal activities. Indeed, Bout adamantly denies that he was involved in weapons trafficking, or that he was anything other than a legitimate air cargo entrepreneur.

Bout's companies shipped vegetables and crayfish from South Africa to Europe, transported United Nations peacekeepers from Pakistan to East Timor, and reportedly assisted the logistics of Operation Restore Hope, the U.S.-led military famine relief effort in Somalia in 1993. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he explored investment opportunities in agriculture and telecommunications and expressed interest in promoting conservation of the country's national parks. "That was the staple stuff," a former associate, who refused to be named, said in an interview. "The dodgy flights were all extras."

U.N. monitors have accused Bout of shipping contraband weapons to rebel movements in Angola and Sierra Leone and to the Taylor regime in Liberia. Bout and his associates operate, or have operated, in Afghanistan, Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya,

Liberia, Libya, Congo-Brazzaville, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, United Arab Emirates and Uganda, according to reports by the United Nations, the U.S. State Department and non-governmental organizations. Intelligence documents obtained by ICIJ and interviews conducted with many of those following and working in the global arms trade further support the allegations against Bout.

Dubbed "the merchant of death" by a British government official, Bout is a former Cold Warrior who became the most notorious gunrunner of the post-Cold War period. He was among the major arms suppliers to combatants in Africa and Afghanistan, often in violation of international embargoes. His planes carried weapons to war zones, and left loaded with diamonds and other valuable resources, such as the mineral coltan, used in the electronics industry. Bout's international shipping business operated through a maze of companies registered around the world, and he was an expert at maneuvering through the labyrinth of brokers, transportation companies, financiers and transshipment points. Shuttling among Africa, Russia, Europe, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, Bout left few, if any, trails. One associate said he had never seen Bout put his signature on a document. There's some question of what he would sign if he did: in law enforcement circles, Bout is known simply as 'Victor B' due to his many aliases.

Until allegations surfaced in January 2002 that he had armed the Taliban in Afghanistan, Bout's global empire operated with impunity in Western democracies, former East Bloc nations, and the developing world. He relied on his network of business partners to provide weapons that fueled some of the most brutal conflicts of the last decade. No national government had been able to do more than temporarily inconvenience him, and the international

community – through the United Nations – had done nothing more than attempt to embarrass him.

“Bout would fly for anyone that paid”

During the Cold War, Africa had been one of the arenas where client regimes and insurgencies battling them had served as proxies for the United States and the Soviet Union. When the Cold War ended, the involvement in the continent's affairs of both the Soviet Union's successor states and the United States waned. But the conflicts continued and presented a lucrative market to arms dealers. Bout saw these opportunities and seized them. His charisma, language skills and, not least, his ability to deliver the goods and fly to places no one else would, gave him access to political leaders and rebel commanders.

“Bout would fly for anyone that paid. He was apolitical,” the former associate told ICIJ. “He is good because he takes the chances.”

In May 1997, as rebel troops of Laurent Kabila were approaching Kinshasa, the capital of what was then Zaire, Mobutu and his immediate



Mobutu Sese Seko
(Reuters)

family fled to his ancestral village Gbadolite. Realizing he was no safer there than in the capital, Mobutu decided to leave Zaire on May 17. But because his luxurious private jet

was in Kinshasa, picking up more family members,

Mobutu relied on an old Soviet-built cargo plane to escape the rebel forces, according to sources interviewed by ICIJ. Bout supplied the aircraft.

Rebel forces got close enough to fire on the plane as it took off. “We were lucky it was a Russian plane. If it had been a Boeing, it would have exploded,” Mobutu's son Nzanga is quoted as saying in Michela Wrong's book, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz*, which chronicles Mobutu's misrule of the country.

Chichakli, the Syrian-born American who worked for several companies owned by Bout, said Mobutu was just one of many clients. “We do not support specific dictators, presidents and so on. We're a transport company,” he said in an interview. “If you buy a ticket from A to B, we will carry.”

Between July 1997 and October 1998, point A was Burgas, a Bulgarian city near the Black Sea, and point B was purportedly Togo in Western Africa. Thirty-seven flights left Burgas carrying weapons – including 20,000 82mm mortar bombs, 6,300 anti-tank rockets, 790 AK47 M1 assault rifles, 1,000 rocket launchers, 500 anti-tank launchers, 100 anti-aircraft missiles, 20 missile launchers, and almost 15 million rounds of ammunition – that ended up in the hands of Savimbi's UNITA forces in Angola, according to a 2000 U.N. report. The shipments were worth \$14 million.

Chichakli denied that Bout was involved in shipping weapons to UNITA, but said they did transport food and mining equipment to Savimbi in November 1995. “Arms are not a good commodity to trade,” Chichakli said in an interview. “You'll lose your client.”

Angola – the ultimate destination for the weapons – had long been a market that Bout, a former Soviet air force officer, coveted. According to former associates, Bout worked in Angola after his regiment was disbanded. Angola had been caught in the middle during the Cold War; the United States backed Savimbi and his UNITA rebels and the Soviet Union supported the

government of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

Angola has one of the largest fleets of Russian-manufactured aircraft in Africa, a fact that was not lost on Bout, who wanted to establish a maintenance facility for Russian planes in South Africa, according to two former associates. Bout's time in Angola gave him a chance to establish contacts and explore future business prospects. He found one in UNITA.

From 1996 to 1998, UNITA was rearming itself. A UNITA general told the United Nations that Bout was their main supplier. Gen. Jacinto Bandua said that the flights arranged by Bout "were known to combine arms with general cargo in order to disguise their missions."

According to the United Nations, Bout provided forged end-user certificates to KAS Engineering, a Gibraltar-registered company, which contracted the Togo arms shipments from the Bulgarian suppliers. End-user certificates are the documents that validate the sales – required whenever arms are shipped to ensure the transaction is legal – but since there is no international standard they are easily forged.

A U.N. report states that "some of the end-user certificates had been provided to the representative of KAS Engineering (Gibraltar) through the captain of a flight coming from Togo and some by express mail from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Further investigations disclosed that the mail was sent by a Mr. Victor Bout."

The forged end-user certificates were all based on a genuine document issued in July 1997 by Col. Assani Tidjani, at the time Togo's Army chief of staff, which he had given to a representative of UNITA, Marcelo Moises Dachala, or "Karrica." Togo was a supporter of UNITA, and Dachala was one of the rebels' main arms procurers.

The U.N. report concluded that UNITA was dependent on this "lifeline" provided by brokers,

shipping agents and aviation companies who shift their "operations in pace with the dynamics of the battlefield and the ever-changing locations of the UNITA forces."

"The murder and mayhem of UNITA in Angola, the RUF in Sierra Leone and groups in Congo would not have been as terrible without Bout's operations," Peter Hain, the British Foreign Office Minister for Europe, told ICIJ. Hain has been at



Peter Hain
(Reuters)

the forefront of the international effort to expose criminal networks behind Africa's trade in small arms and the "conflict diamonds" that fund such purchases. Hain also said that the danger posed by Bout was clear in his supply of weapons to another deadly regime: the Taliban.

Supplying the Taliban

According to a Belgian intelligence document [first reported](#) by ICIJ in January 2002, Bout earned \$50 million selling weapons to the Taliban in the late 1990s. Another European intelligence source independently verified the sales, and an intelligence document from an African country in which Bout operated claim that Bout ran guns for the Taliban "on behalf of the Pakistan government."

Bout, [in a statement](#), denied any association with the Taliban or al Qaeda and with "arms traffickers and/or trafficking or the sale of arms of kind [sic] anywhere in the world." A Pakistani official denied that Pakistan served as a conduit for weapons shipped to the Taliban, saying that Pakistan abided by the Dec. 19, 2000, U.N. arms embargo imposed on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and actively promoted interdiction. The weapons allegedly supplied by Bout were delivered before the sanctions were in place.

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Bout's relationship with the Taliban began in August 1995, when the radical Islamist movement was trying to overthrow President Burhanuddin Rabbani's government in Kabul. One of Bout's planes flying from Albania via Sharjah and transporting small arms and military equipment on behalf of Israeli company Long Range Avionics to Rabbani was intercepted by a MiG-21. The plane was forced to land in Taliban-controlled territory, according to the ICIJ investigation.

Bout, together with Russian diplomats, met Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders to negotiate the release of the detained crew in Kandahar, but they were not successful. A year later, on Aug. 16, 1996, the seven Russian crewmembers disarmed their guards and took off in the Il-76 for Sharjah, according to press reports. The *Washington Monthly* later quoted an unnamed source, who said he believed Bout turned the situation to his advantage by establishing contacts with the Taliban.

After being a blip on the radar screen of the international community since the mid-1990s and operating with impunity for years in Africa's conflict zones, Bout's profile rose markedly after he was linked to supplying the Taliban, which gave military support to al Qaeda. The United Arab Emirates, the main base for his operation, told the United Nations in early 2002 that his companies were prohibited from operating there and banned him from entering. In February 2002, Belgian authorities issued an international arrest warrant through Interpol for him on "money laundering practices and criminal conspiracy."

The case is still pending.

Chichakli, who lives in Texas and was named by the United Nations as being Bout's chief financial manager, said U.S. authorities had not contacted him about Bout, even though Bout listed the Texas corporate address for San Air General Trading, a United Arab Emirates-based

company owned by former Bout employee Serguei Denissenko, as his destination when he applied for a visa to come to the United States in summer 2000. Chichakli "clearly has connections to Bout," Lee S. Wolosky, a former National Security Council official told ICIJ. Wolosky, who closely followed the international arms trade, said the connection "concerned me and others at the National Security Council," but that there was a limit to what the White House could do, aside from referring the case to law enforcement. "U.S. authorities know everything about Bout," Chichakli said.

On Feb. 28, 2002, Bout surfaced in Moscow to defend himself. Just a few blocks from the Kremlin, he walked into the studios of radio station Ekho Moskv to protest his innocence in a live interview. "What should I be afraid of?" Bout said. "I haven't done anything in my life to worry about ... I deal exclusively with air transportation. And I have never been involved in arms trade. I have never taken part in it."

The same day, the Russian news agency Interfax quoted Igor Tsiryulnikov, a spokesman for Interpol's Russia bureau, saying that no arrest warrant had been received. "We can say for sure that Bout is not in Russia," Tsiryulnikov said.

Paper Trails Leading Nowhere

Flights carrying arms to Afghanistan were the primary operations from Bout's European base at Belgium's Ostend airport, frequently cited by human rights groups for hosting companies and individuals involved in arms trafficking. Bout established his first Western European company there in November 1994.

In March 1995, Bout and a Frenchman, Michel-Victor Thomas, founded Trans Aviation Network Group (TAN), according to U.N. and intelligence reports. Ronald De Smet, a Belgian pilot who used to fly for the Saudi royal family,

was TAN's chief executive officer. Chichakli told ICIJ that De Smet, the son of a former official of Gecamines mining company in Congo, "spearheaded" the expansion of Bout's air cargo business in western Europe. Between 1995 and 1997, TAN's operating base was Ostend airport. De Smet and Thomas could not be reached for comment.

At first, most of the shipments from Ostend were intended for Afghanistan, according to reports compiled by local citizens' groups that monitor the airport. The Belgian intelligence document obtained by ICIJ noted that Bout's company Trans Aviation (TAN) delivered at least 40 tons of weapons from Ostend to Afghanistan. Soon Bout was also reportedly associated with arms traffickers who armed Hutu extremists carrying out the Rwanda genocide. In 1996, two years after the genocide in Rwanda, Bout and a group of European arms traffickers in Ostend were arming Hutu forces in Congo, according to Johan Peleman, a U.N. investigator into arms violations.

But Ostend did not remain an ideal base for Bout's operations. After details of the shipments to Afghanistan were reported in the local media, Bout packed up his possessions, moved out of his home, and left Belgium in June 1997. TAN had already vacated its Ostend headquarters. And Belgian authorities started an investigation into allegations of illegal arms shipments out of Ostend and money laundering. But Bout wasn't ready to give up on Belgium entirely. A company called Air Cess, registered in Liberia, moved into the offices vacated by TAN. Air Cess listed Bout as its director. Later in the 1990s, Bout allegedly transferred the daily operations of Air Cess to his brother Serguei.

Such arrangements are typical of how Bout did business. He established a veritable web of companies, some of which he ran, some of which were run by former employees and associates of

his, obscuring his involvement in the arms trade. Air Cess, for example, though registered in Liberia, operated in Ostend, Geneva, and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.

The planes that were the backbone of his operations either flew under "flags of convenience" – that is, registered in countries that allowed him to circumvent international regulations on air cargo – or from airports like Burgas and Ostend that are known for their lax oversight of air freight operations, or from Sharjah. The United Arab Emirates is a major financial center and crossroads for east-west trade. With its large volume of transiting cargo, its bank secrecy laws, and its bustling free trade zones, it is a perfect base for arms dealers. According to the United Nations, almost all of Bout's aircraft operated out of the United Arab Emirates – regardless of where they were registered. Bout used Sharjah as an "airport of convenience."



Sharjah airport (www.shj-airport.gov.ae)

Bout excelled at getting around international rules and regulations governing the cargo industry, thanks in part to his connections. The industry lacks effective oversight and the regulations are viewed as being out of date by industry associations. Shipping agents and brokers are unregulated, which makes it difficult to tell who is a legitimate operator and who is not.

Airfreight documents do not require cross-referencing of the goods described in the arms export and import licenses. Arms shipments are often described as engineering, mining, or agricultural equipment. One is not required to specify the travel route or any possible sub-contractors and the ultimate customer.

In addition to the lax and outdated regulations, it is not difficult for someone who knows the system to change the aircraft registration from one country to another – something Bout and his associates took advantage of. “Flag of convenience” countries allow aircraft to operate without the same level of cargo documentation. It is not even necessary for an airplane to be physically present in a such a country in order for it to be registered there.

Indeed, there’s a cottage industry in shifting aircraft registrations around the globe. Michael Harridine, for example, not only can provide services such as aircraft registration and operators’ certificates, but openly advertises the fact, according to the United Nations. Harridine, who runs Kent-based Aircraft Registration Bureau in the United Kingdom, now offers a full range of services for the Equatorial Guinea Civil Aircraft Register – a country to which Bout moved most of his aircraft registrations in 2001. According to a December 2000 United Nations report, Harridine can provide a client with a company name, air operators certificates, full aircraft and company documentation, ferry permits and validations for the crew.

A maze of companies

After Bout left Belgium in 1997, southern Africa became the base of his entrepreneurial efforts. According to the United Nations, Bout used his expertise to expand the trade in weapons there. “[L]ocal carriers had the established routes and well formed contacts in

the area, but lacked capacity. Mr. Bout, through his numerous contacts in the ex-Soviet air force, was immediately able to provide the required capacity and, in return, took advantage of the established routes and contacts in the southern African region,” the 2000 U.N. report on Bout said. He also had the necessary capital: the proceeds from selling weapons to Afghanistan helped Bout establish his business interests in South Africa.

Bout’s Liberian company, Air Cess, formed a joint venture with Norse Air, a South African cargo company headed by Dierdre Ward. That new company, registered with South African authorities on Feb. 19, 1997, was called Pietersburg Aviation Services and Systems (Pty) Ltd. but did business under the name of Air Pass, according to intelligence files obtained by ICIJ. Corporation records listed Valerii Naido, a Ukrainian pilot and former Bout employee, as a director of Pietersburg Aviation Services and Systems, along with Ward, the company’s financial controller.

Bout owned 90 percent of Pietersburg Aviation, and Ward owned the rest. In exchange for that 10 percent stake in the company, Ward let Bout use Norse Air’s charter operator’s license, which allowed Air Pass to operate in South Africa. Air Cess used Norse Air to apply to South African aviation authorities for its own foreign operators license. Ward, in comments to ICIJ, characterized her relationship with Bout as “a straight business operation” with shared premises. “Nothing illegal left here,” she said, adding that she had no idea that Bout was accused of gun-running until much later when she started hearing rumors through industry sources. Their business relationship ended in 1998.

Bout’s activities in South Africa soon came under official scrutiny. Authorities launched an investigation in 1998 and charged Bout’s

company with various violations, such as busting U.N. sanctions by sending trucks, fuel tanks and other supplies to UNITA-held areas of Angola. The inspections occurred at a time when South African Airlines (SAA) was trying to increase its cargo capability through its subsidiary SAF Air, according to South African lawyer and law professor André Thomashausen, who defended Bout against some of the charges. At the time, Bout was more than just an arms trader: his legitimate operations made him one of the largest air cargo operators in South Africa.

Thomashausen said that most of the charges against Air Pass were mainly aimed at harassing Bout. "Bout was attacked from all sides ... it was amazing," Thomashausen said. "Authorities started showing up at all times measuring equipment and aircraft parts, which was never done."

Bout did not rely on the courts alone to protect his operations. "Before the company [Air Pass] could be charged with 146 breaches of civil aviation law," read one intelligence document obtained by ICIJ, "the whole operation was moved to Swaziland." Air Cess Swaziland (Pty) Ltd. had been established on August 20, 1997, and obtained a two-year operations license from the civil aviation authorities in Swaziland.

South African authorities alerted civil aviation authorities in Swaziland that Bout's aircraft were "suspected of involvement in illegal acts." In May 1998, "43 aircraft operated by five companies including Air Cess and Air Pass" were grounded because of "inadequate documentation," the African intelligence file shows.

Bout shifted bases again. On May 28, 1998, he registered another company, Centrafrican Airlines, in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, which was licensed to operate domestic flights two months later. The company had an operations office in Sharjah, headquartered at Transavia Travel Agency, a

part of Bout's TAN group. The United Nations said in 2001 that an airplane belonging to Centrafrican Airlines had been seen parked at airports in Sharjah and Ras-al-Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates. According to a database of worldwide cargo aircraft, Centrafrican Airlines operated several of the Air Pass and Air Cess aircraft that were de-registered in Swaziland.

In January 2000, authorities in the Central African Republic issued an arrest warrant for the director of civil aviation, the local manager of Centrafrican Airlines, and Bout. Allegedly, the three had "fabricated airworthiness certificates, air operator permits and certificates of registration for a great number of aircraft," according to a U.N. report. Bout managed to escape the local authorities, while the director of civil aviation was sentenced to a year in prison for fraud and forgery. In March 2000, Bout was sentenced in absentia to two years in prison by a tribunal in the capital of Bangui after an aircraft belonging to him used the markings of the state-owned airline on a flight to Gabon. For unknown reasons, a Bangui court absolved Bout of the charges three months later, on June 28, 2000, according to the United Nations. Nevertheless, the office of Centrafrican Airlines in Bangui was closed.

The company, however, lived on. By the fall of 2001, Centrafrican Airlines shared an address and phone number in the United Arab Emirates with San Air General Trading, a company run by a former employee of Bout's, Serguei Denissenko. According to the United Nations, both companies became part of an entity called CET Aviation Enterprise in the Ajman Free Zone in the United Arab Emirates. San Air General Trading, which also registered in Texas with Denissenko, Chichakli and a Vladimir Kviazeev as directors, acted as the commercial and operations agent for Centrafrican Airlines.

Ultimately, all the filings and companies led back to Bout. The United Nations reported that Centrafrican Airlines, San Air and Transavia Travel Cargo in Sharjah “all appear to have originated from the Transavia Network (TAN [Trans Aviation Network] Group) which originated in Ostende, Belgium.”

In 2001, Centrafrican Airlines aircraft registered in the Central African Republic were re-registered in Equatorial Guinea, according to the United Nations. Naido, the former Bout pilot and one of the directors of Pietersburg Aviation Services and Systems, assisted an agency that registers planes in Equatorial Guinea, according to the United Nations. Naido also ran a company called CET Aviation in Equatorial Guinea. A former Bout associate told ICIJ that Naido was “Bout’s number two” in South Africa.

‘A covert network’

By 1999, it appeared that the efforts of the South African authorities and the setbacks in Swaziland had caused Bout to cease operations in southern Africa. He had put his Sandhurst home on the market in 1998, and appeared to have given up on his lucrative cargo business in the region. However, investigative reports obtained by ICIJ reveal that he just changed his tactics. “Bout is now operating a covert network of sub-contractors consisting of smaller Russian operators,” one document states, adding that “there were 36 flights of his [Bout’s] aircraft through South Africa” in 2000 and another 16 up to March 2001.

According to U.N. reports, intelligence documents and interviews with sources, these smaller Russian sub-contractors operated mainly out of South Africa. Indeed, Yuri Sidorov, Andrei Kossolapov and Victor N. Zieleniuk all run legitimate cargo businesses out of South Africa. They also ferry arms to Angola, the Congo, and

Rwanda, according to intelligence and other investigative reports obtained by ICIJ. Sidorov, Kossolapov and Zieleniuk did not respond to requests for comment.

Some reports suggested that both Sidorov and Kossolapov competed with Bout before they started to work with him, but Chichakli denied this. “Buying an aircraft is one thing, running an air cargo business is something different,” Chichakli said. He said Bout was the only one who had the skills and know-how to master the logistics of a far-flung international cargo operation.

One intelligence document, which ICIJ could not independently verify, identified Yuri Sidorov, Bout’s former chief pilot, as a member of “Russian Organisatziya” or Russian organized crime. A former Bout associate told ICIJ that Sidorov was “one of the pioneers in the cargo industry” in South Africa and “is involved with Volga Air,” a company that operated 10 Antonov aircraft. The intelligence document alleged that Volga Air supplied the Rwandan-backed rebel army Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) in the Congo. It also claimed that one aircraft was also dedicated to supplying UNITA on almost a daily basis. Sidorov is one of the directors of Volga Air, according to South African incorporation records. He worked for a South Africa-based Russian company in the early 1990s called Romoco.

Kossolapov, another of Bout’s subcontractors, has also been connected to Romoco. A former Bout associate described Kossolapov as a “maverick that always wanted to go at it alone.” The source said Bout took the maverick under his wing; Kossolapov also did some of the logistic work for Bout after he sold his house and moved from South Africa.

Bout’s subcontractor has some notable business partners of his own. According to the United Nations, one of Kossolapov’s business

partners is Zieleniuk, who runs News Air and is the director of Mega Manufacturing Holdings, which was set up by Rosvooruzheniye, the Russian state weapons manufacturing company, to build a client base for arms deals. Zieleniuk owns an Antonov-12 aircraft stationed at Entebbe in Uganda and has military connections in the Congo and Zambia. One U.N. report said Bout is “strongly suspected to be connected to Russian organized crime,” and the African intelligence document obtained by ICIJ alleged that Zieleniuk, Sidorov and Bout all belonged to the same Russian organized crime syndicate.

Bout’s man in Liberia

Bout’s connections to arms deals were often shrouded by middlemen. One such was Sanjivan Ruprah, a politically well-connected Kenyan businessman who aided Bout in his dealings with Liberia’s president Charles Taylor. “The actions of Sanjivan Ruprah are equally odious as those of Victor Bout,” Hain, the British Foreign Office minister, said. “He supplies diamonds and brings in arms with Victor Bout’s assistance.”

According to the United Nations, Ruprah acted as a middleman between Bout and Taylor, assisting in supplying rebels in eastern Congo and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. An October 2002 U.N. report said Bout operated two companies in the Congo that gave logistical support to the various foreign armies and criminal networks involved in the exploitation of that country’s mineral resources.

Ruprah told ICIJ that he has known Bout since April 1998, and made use of his planes for legitimate purposes only. “I utilized his aircraft – as did several other companies, as well as various African governments and I believe the [United Nations] – several times for transporting my mining equipment.” He also denied any connection to arms trafficking.

Associated with the Kenyan subsidiary of Branch Energy, a British company that owned diamond rights in Sierra Leone, Ruprah introduced Executive Outcomes, the South African mercenary company, to the government of Sierra Leone in 1995. EO provided security for mining company Branch Energy and helped the government successfully turn the war against the Revolutionary United Front from mid-1995 to early 1997.

Ruprah denied any connection to Executive Outcomes. He further stated that, “My business has been predominantly diamond mining since 1996 and I have been awarded completely official and legal concessions for the same.” He dismissed allegations that he had traded in conflict diamonds as “rumors.”

Ruprah is closely connected to the Liberian government, and was authorized to act as a worldwide agent for the Liberian Civil Aviation Regulatory Authority in November 1999, giving him authority to issue aircraft registration certificates. Bout registered several aircraft in Liberia. Ruprah was also given a Liberian diplomatic passport in the name of Samir M. Nasr, making it easier for him to avoid the travel ban imposed by the United Nations. In his response to ICIJ, Ruprah said he “maintained a fairly good relationship” with Taylor and his government.

In an Oct. 2001 report, the United Nations noted that Ruprah “carries additional authorization from the Liberian International Ship and Corporate Registry.”

The same United Nations report says that the Liberian International Ship and Corporate Registry (LISCR) made two payments totaling \$925,000 to San Air General Trading – the United Arab Emirates-based company that acted as the agent for Bout’s Centrafrican Airways – through a bank in the United Arab Emirates for arms and transportation in 2000. LISCR, based in

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Vienna, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C., channels \$18 million a year to the Liberian government and acknowledged to the United Nations that it had made payments to non-government accounts.

Ruprah, whose links to conflict diamonds, arms smuggling and mercenaries in West Africa were first exposed by the United Nations in 2000, moved to Belgium in mid 2001 and was immediately put under surveillance by Belgian intelligence. At the time, his relationship with Taylor, the Liberian president, had started to deteriorate, and his wife, the sister of Rally for Congolese Democracy-Goma (RCD) leader Adolphe Onusumba, was severely ill. (She later died.)

After a three-year investigation by Belgian authorities into companies suspected of involvement in laundering the proceeds of Bout's arms sales, Ruprah was arrested in Uccle, an exclusive neighborhood in Brussels, on Feb. 5, 2002. He was charged with criminal conspiracy and possession of false passports. The arrest was untimely for the United States since Ruprah was in frequent contact with U.S. authorities, with whom he was trying to negotiate a deal to talk about past weapons deliveries to the Taliban and possibly al Qaeda.

Ruprah was later released and jumped bail in Belgium. He was arrested again in northern Italy on Aug. 2, 2002, and is being investigated for alleged criminal association and possession of a false passport. Ruprah's lawyer, Stefano Sangiovanni, told The Associated Press that his 36-year old client had helped Bout transport some mining equipment to Africa but denies any further involvement with Bout.

Italian authorities ruled him a flight risk and moved him to a high-security prison near Milan, but said that Ruprah would likely be released since the charges were not serious enough to keep him incarcerated. In September 2002,

Ruprah was released from jail but ordered to report daily to Italian police while the investigation continues.

Beyond Bout

While Bout's use of shell companies, middlemen and current or former employees to obscure his role in trading arms has been well established, one crucial question remains about his operations: what are the sources of the sophisticated weaponry that Bout sold? Or, as one retired businessman who specialized in black market gunrunning for the U.S. government told ICIJ, "You don't just walk into Tirana or Romania and say give me tanks. It just doesn't work that way."

Several sources involved in the weapons trade, interviewed by ICIJ, noted Bout's "deep connections" with Ernst Werner Glatt, reputedly one of Washington's favorite gunrunners during the Cold War. Glatt also had ties to Washington's Cold War opponent. He was "very well ensconced in downtown Moscow," one source said. "He was so tight with the KGB in the early 1990s that they even tried to get him into the building next door to their headquarters." Glatt did not respond to requests for comment.

There are also allegations that Bout has ties to the director of Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs. Maj. Gen. Vladimir Marchenko, who was appointed in May 1998, is a career counterintelligence officer who served in Federal Security Bureau units in Krasnodar and Rostov, and as deputy head of the FSB's anti-terrorism department. When he joined the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Russian press wrote that Marchenko "is considered a specialist in organized crime among ethnic groups, and specialists believe that his arrival will seriously change the way things are done in the ISA."

By The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

According to the African intelligence document obtained by ICIJ, Marchenko is also the head of a crime syndicate carrying his last name. Marchenko allegedly recalled Bout to Russia after the Angolan government canceled its business with Bout when it found out in 1998 that the alleged gunrunner had supplied both

sides in the war. Marchenko and the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not respond to several requests for comment.

Chichakli, who said Marchenko was “a business acquaintance” of Bout’s, nonetheless disputed that account. “Bout cannot be recalled by anyone, because he works for no one.”