

U.S. Judge Says Evidence in Bout Case 'Seems Thin'

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NEW YORK — A U.S. judge said portions of the case by U.S. prosecutors against Russian businessman Viktor Bout "seem thin" as the suspected arms dealer prepares to stand trial in a New York federal court in September.

"I don't see there is much evidence," U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin said late last week, responding to defense arguments that U.S. authorities failed to show that Bout's accused actions involved the United States. "It does seem thin to me."

Bout was extradited from Thailand in November after his arrest in Bangkok in March 2008 in a U.S.-led sting operation.

He pleaded not guilty last November to charges that include conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals and conspiracy to provide help to a terrorist group. He faces 25 years to life in prison if convicted on the charges.

In the operation, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents posed as arms buyers

from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The United States classifies the Colombian group as a terrorist organization and says it is deeply involved in the cocaine trade.

U.S. prosecutors told the judge on Thursday that they had ample evidence to show that Bout knew the Colombian group intended to harm Americans.

The judge had gathered both sides to hear arguments over defense requests to dismiss charges against Bout. The judge did not immediately rule on the motions.

According to court documents, Bout offered to sell the agents, posing as Colombian rebels, advanced man-portable surface-to-air missiles, as well as some 5,000 AK-47 assault rifles.

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