

New York Jury Rules Bout Guilty

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NEW YORK — Russian businessman Viktor Bout was convicted of conspiracy in U.S. court on Wednesday for plotting to sell a terrorist group millions of dollars worth of weapons, including surface-to-air missiles.

Bout, 44, was found guilty by a federal jury of four counts of conspiracy for attempting to conduct an arms sale with two men posing as members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC. U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin in Manhattan set sentencing for Feb. 8.

He faces as long as life in prison.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency set up the sting operation that led to Bout's arrest in Bangkok in March 2008. He was flown to New York for prosecution in November.

In closing arguments on Monday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Anjan Sahni told jurors that Bout and an associate, Andrew Smulian, who pleaded guilty and is cooperating with the U.S., agreed to provide the weaponry to men they believed were members of the Colombian insurgent group. The FARC is classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the European Union.

"Bout repeatedly said he was ready, willing and able to carry out this weapons deal," Sahni said during his closing arguments. "He saw a chance to outfit a large terrorist insurgency," the prosecutor said. "In other words, a long-term opportunity to make a lot of money."

During the trial, Smulian and the two who posed as FARC agents testified that Bout had offered to sell them millions of dollars worth of weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, armor-piercing rocket launchers and AK-47 rifles.

The prosecutors presented evidence that they said showed Bout believed he was providing 100 tons of weapons for as many as 12,000 FARC guerrilla fighters. Bout also offered to transport the weapons and provide personnel who could train the insurgents in how to use them, prosecutors said.

Albert Dayan, Bout's lawyer, told jurors in his closing arguments on Monday that Bout had had only attempted to sell several airplanes to the men, though he had "once upon a time been in the arms distribution business."

"Viktor was playing a role, he was acting out," Dayan said. "All you have is a lot of talk," he said, citing conversations recorded by the U.S. government.

"All they have is speculation, innuendos and conjecture," he said later of the government's case.

Jurors began their deliberations Tuesday.

Prosecutors said Bout, who also worked as an arms dealer in East Africa in the 1990s, controlled a fleet of as many as 50 cargo planes capable of transporting weapons and military equipment to Africa, South America and the Middle East. At the time he was arraigned, U.S. Attorney Preet Bharra referred to Bout as "the so-called Merchant of Death."

In his closings, Sahni cited e-mails and secretly recorded conversations in which Bout and his co-conspirators discussed delivering the weapons via an airdrop, which he developed during his time in Africa.

"We are together, we have the same enemy," Bout is heard saying on one wiretapped recording. "I've been fighting the United States for 10 to 15 years."

Bout was charged with four counts with conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals, conspiracy to kill U.S. officers or employees, conspiracy to acquire an anti-aircraft missile and conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist group.

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