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Bout Associate to Represent Himself in U.S.

By The Moscow Times

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NEW YORK — A Syrian-born associate of notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout said he would represent himself at his upcoming trial on charges that he conspired to buy planes to move weapons to the world's bloodiest conflicts.

Richard Chichakli was arrested in January in Australia and was brought to the U.S., where he is accused of conspiring with people including former Soviet air officer Bout, who is dubbed the "Merchant of Death."

At a pretrial conference Thursday, Chichakli told U.S. District Judge William H. Pauley III that he will represent himself at his November trial.

The judge warned Chichakli that it was unwise to represent himself, but Chichakli said he preferred it even after consulting with lawyers about his decision at the judge's request. He told the judge he has two doctorates, four master's degrees and nine bachelor's degrees.

"I'm a highly educated person," he told the judge. "I am the best fit to address this court about questions accusing me."

He said his lawyer seemed too nice.

"I am here for my life," he said.

As Chichakli has done before, he said he had served in the U.S. Army.

In a 2010 interview in Moscow, Chichakli said the U.S. criminal case against Bout was based on "lies" and questioned whether justice was possible in the U.S.

"The U.S. made up this case for one simple reason," he said at the time, "to get to Viktor Bout."

Chichakli said then that he had "never done business with Viktor Bout."

An indictment accuses Chichakli and Bout of violating sanctions by arranging to buy two Boeing aircraft from U.S. companies in 2007. It says they electronically transferred more than $1.7 million through banks in New York, though the money was blocked by the U.S. Department of the Treasury before it reached the aviation companies' accounts.

Prosecutors say Chichakli worked closely with Bout since at least the mid-1990s to assemble a fleet of cargo planes to ship weapons and military equipment to various parts of the world, including Africa, South America and the Middle East.

Prosecutors say the arms have helped fuel conflicts and support regimes in Afghanistan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

Bout is serving 25 years in prison after he was convicted of conspiracy relating to the support of a Colombian terrorist organization. He maintains that he was a legitimate businessman.

Bout was dubbed the Merchant of Death because of his 1990s-era notoriety for running a fleet of aging Soviet-era cargo planes to conflict-ridden hotspots in Africa. He inspired the arms dealer character played by Nicolas Cage in the 2005 film "Lord of War."

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