



ROB
DAY

The MERCHANT of DEATH

Russian entrepreneur Viktor Bout has made millions as the world's most efficient postman, able to deliver any kind of cargo—especially illicit weapons—anywhere in the world. How was he able to build his intricate underground network? By exploiting cracks in the anarchy of globalization. | **By Douglas Farah and Stephen Braun**

In many ways, Viktor Bout is a prototypical, modern-day, multinational entrepreneur. He is smart, savvy, and ambitious. He's good with numbers, speaks several languages, and knows how to seize opportunities when they arise. According to those who've met him, he's polite, professional, and unassuming. Bout has no known history of violence, and no political agenda. He loves his family. He's fed the poor. And through his hard work, he's become extraordinarily wealthy. During the past decade, Bout's business acumen has earned him hundreds of millions of dollars. What, exactly, does he do? Former colleagues describe him as a postman, able to deliver any package virtually anywhere in the world.

Not yet 40 years old, the Russian national also happens to be the world's most notorious arms trafficker. He, more than almost anyone else, has succeeded in exploiting the anarchy of globalization

to get goods—usually illicit goods—to market. He's a wanted man, desired by those who require a small military arsenal and pursued by law enforcement agencies who want to bring him down. Globe-trotting weapons merchants have long flooded the Third World with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and warehouses of bullets and landmines. But unlike his rivals, who tend to carve out small regional territories, Bout's planes have dropped off his tell-tale military-green crates from jungle landing strips in the Congo to bleak hillside runways in Afghanistan. He has developed a worldwide network of logistics, maneuvering through a maze of brokers, transportation companies, financiers, and weapons manufacturers—both illicit and legitimate—to deliver everything from fresh-cut flowers, frozen poultry, and U.N. peacekeepers to assault rifles and surface-to-air missiles across four continents.

His client list for weapons is long. In the 1990s, Bout was a friend and supplier to the legendary Ahmed Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, while simultaneously selling weapons and aircraft to the Taliban, Massoud's enemy. His fleet flew for the government of Angola, as well as for the UNITA rebels seeking to overthrow it. He sent an aircraft to rescue Mobutu Sese Seko, the ailing and cor-

*Douglas Farah, a former Washington Post foreign correspondent, is a terror finance consultant and author of *Blood from Stones: The Secret Financial Network of Terror* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004). Stephen Braun is a national correspondent for the Los Angeles Times. The authors are writing a book about Viktor Bout, which will be published in 2007.*

rupt ruler of Zaire, even though he had supplied the rebels who were closing in on Mobutu's last stronghold. He has catered to Charles Taylor of Liberia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and Libyan strongman Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Bout's customers are not exclusively corrupt Third-World leaders. He built his fortune by flying tons of legitimate cargo, too. These included countless trips for the United Nations into the same areas where he supplied the weapons that sparked the humanitarian crises in the first place. He's done business with Western governments, including the United States. Over the past several years, the U.S. Treasury Department has tried to put Bout out of business by freezing his assets and imposing other sanctions on him, his business associates, and his companies. But the Pentagon and its contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan have simultaneously paid him millions of dollars to fly hundreds of missions in support of post-war reconstruction in both countries. In an age when the U.S. president has divided the world into those who are with the United States and those who are against it, Bout is both.

International officials believe that Bout's business practices—in particular, his refusal to discriminate among those who are willing to pay the right price—are, in fact, illegal. Peter Hain, then the British Foreign Office minister responsible for Africa, stood in Parliament in 2000 to lash out against those violating U.N. arms sanctions. He singled out Bout, dubbing him Africa's "merchant of death." But Bout's deals often fall into a legal gray area that global

Yet Bout has managed to elude authorities over and over again. Laws simply do not address transnational, nonstate actors such as Bout. His most egregious illegal acts have included multiple violations of U.N. arms embargos, a crime for which there is no penalty and for which there is no enforcement mechanism. Today, Bout lives openly in Moscow, protected by a Russian government unconcerned by the international outcry that surrounds him and his business empire.

INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY

Much of Viktor Bout's early history is either unknown or of his own making. He is married and has at least one daughter; that much is true. His older brother Sergei works for him. But any other personal information is clouded in mystery. Even his place of birth is unclear. According to his official Russian passport, Bout was born on Jan. 13, 1967, in the faded Soviet outpost of Dushanbe, Tajikistan. But during a 2002 radio interview in Moscow, Bout said he was born near the Caspian Sea in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. A 2001 South African intelligence report lists him as Ukrainian. He is known to carry more than one passport and use an array of aliases, including Vadim S. Aminov, Victor Anatolievitsch Bout, Victor S. Bulakin, and the sardonic favorite of his American pursuers, Victor Butt.

The deliberate obfuscation has made it difficult to track Bout, his partners, and his business. He says he was an Air Force officer and has acknowledged graduating from the prestigious Soviet Military Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow in the late 1980s. He reportedly speaks fluent English, French, Portuguese, Uzbek, and several African languages. U.N. officials say he worked as a translator for peacekeepers in Angola in the late 1980s. Several reports tie him to Russian organized crime. Although British and South African intelligence reports say that Bout was stationed in Rome with the KGB from 1985 to 1989, he has strenuously denied any intelligence background. But military language school was a known training ground for the GRU (or Main Intelligence Directorate)—the vast, secretive, Soviet military intelligence network that oversaw the Cold War flow of Russian arms to revolutionary movements and communist client states in the Third World.

Viktor Bout is a wanted man, desired by those who require a small military arsenal and pursued by law enforcement agencies who want to bring him down.

jurisprudence has simply failed to proscribe. It's not for lack of trying. His peripatetic aircraft appear in little-noticed U.N. reports documenting arms embargo violations in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Sierra Leone. U.S. spy satellites have photographed his airplanes loading crates of weapons on remote airstrips in Africa. American and British intelligence officials have eavesdropped on his telephone conversations. Interpol has issued a "red notice," requesting his arrest on Belgian weapons trafficking and money-laundering charges.



Up in arms: One of the only known photographs of Viktor Bout, left, was taken with a zoom lens in central Africa.

Whether or not he was a secret agent, by the time the Cold War ended, Bout had struck out on his own and was ready to salvage the remaining scraps of the Soviet empire. The entire Soviet Air Force was on life support, as money for maintenance and fuel evaporated. Thousands of pilots and crew members were suddenly unemployed. Hundreds of lumbering old Antonov and Ilyushin cargo planes sat abandoned at airports and military bases from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok, their tires frayed and their worn frames patched with sheet metal and duct tape.

Moving quickly, Bout acquired cargo planes destined for the junkyard. By his own account, Bout, then 25, bought his first trio of old Antonovs for \$120,000, hiring crews to fly cargo on a maiden flight to Denmark, then on longer-distance routes to Africa and the Middle East. But his business and financial associates tell a different version. “The GRU gave him three airplanes to start the business,” said one European associate who knew Bout in Russia and worked with him in Africa. “He had finished language school, but he had learned to fly. The planes, countless numbers of them, were sitting there doing nothing. They decided, let’s make this commercial. They gave Viktor the aircraft and in exchange collected a part of the charter money.”

Bout’s initial stock in trade was the supply of guns and ammunition abandoned in arsenals around the former Soviet bloc. Many had airstrips built inside their

compounds, making loading easy. Guards were often unpaid and their commanders were willing to sell the weapons for a fraction of the market value. This availability of weapons was married to an instant clientele of former Soviet clients, unstable governments, dictators, warlords, and guerilla armies clamoring for steady supplies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. “He had a logistics network, the best in the world,” says Lee S. Wolosky, a former staff member at the National Security Council (NSC) who led the United States’ interagency efforts to track Bout in the late 1990s. “There are a lot of people who can deliver arms to Africa or Afghanistan, but you can count on one hand those who can deliver major weapons systems rapidly. Viktor Bout is at the top of that list.”

By the late 1990s, Bout had perfected his modus operandi—the ability to move his aircraft ahead of government efforts to ground them. To obtain permission to fly internationally, an aircraft must be registered in a country where its maintenance records and airworthiness are certified. Each country in the world has a series of call letters assigned to it, so the country of origin of any aircraft should be immediately identifiable by matching call letters on a plane’s tail. By repeatedly registering planes in different countries, Bout’s aircraft were able to avoid local aviation rules, inspections, and oversight. According to a December 2000 U.N. investigation, Bout often registered his planes in Liberia, a nation that had sold its aircraft registry to

business associates who helped Bout set up the aviation and holding companies he used for arms trafficking. Run from Kent, England, the Liberian “Aircraft Registration Bureau” offered a full range of services, without anyone ever inspecting the aircraft. This included the “creation of a company name; air operators certificate (no restrictions); full aircraft/company documentation; ferry permits and crew validations,” the U.N. report noted. That same group controlled the registry of Equatorial Guinea, so when international pressure mounted on Liberia to decertify Bout’s aircraft, he simply reregistered them, a process that took only a few hours through a series of phone and computer transactions.

Although Bout’s aircraft were registered and reregistered in far-flung corners of the world, they almost all operated out of Sharjah, a small desert sheikhdom in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that serves as a central base for flights to and from the former Soviet bloc, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. There, Bout continued to muddle his company structures. The aircraft registered in Equatorial Guinea operated under the name Air Cess, and those registered in the Central African Republic flew for Central African Airlines. Although the two airlines had different addresses, they had the same Sharjah phone numbers.

Bout’s first known weapons flights were to Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance in 1992. Three years later, a MiG fighter jet, flown by the Taliban, intercepted a hulking freighter leased by Bout for delivery of several million rounds of ammunition to the government in Kabul. Taliban soldiers seized the aircraft’s cargo and imprisoned its crew. Bout negotiated with the mullahs for months. Finally, after a year, the crew pulled off what appeared to be a miraculous escape, outwitting their captors by flying the Ilyushin out of Kandahar. But skeptical Western intelligence officials and Bout’s rivals later suggested the crew’s release was tied to Bout’s secret work for the mullahs. After all, in 1995, Sharjah had established a free trade zone that soon became known for its lax oversight and close ties to Islamist radicals. Because the UAE was one of only three countries (along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Sharjah became the main shopping center for the regime, where it was able to purchase everything from weapons and satellite telephones to refrigerators and generators.

Soon a covert business relationship was established between the Taliban and Bout’s network. Bout’s avionics and maintenance crews serviced planes flown

Express Delivery

POULTRY:

Not all of Bout’s shipments were illicit. Sometimes he even transported frozen chickens.

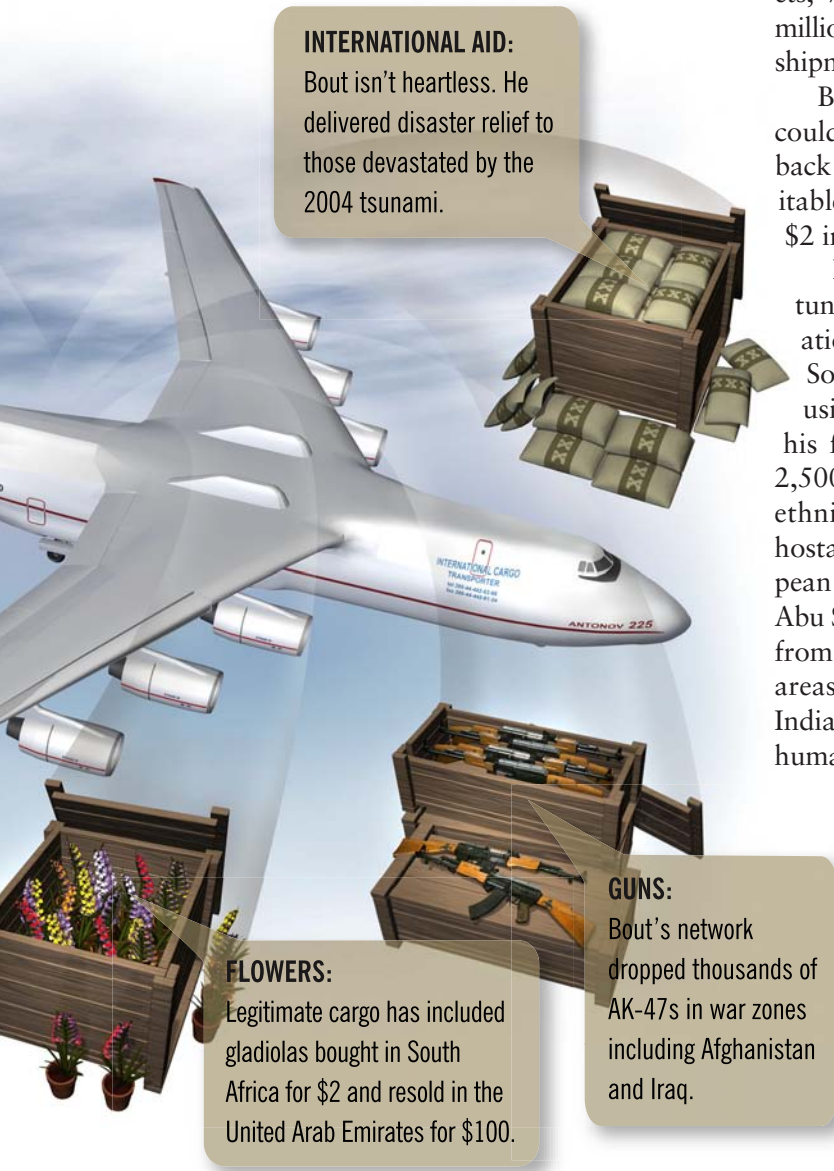
ROCKETS AND TANKS:

Bout’s planes carried tanks and missiles to several countries in Africa, including Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia.

by Ariana Afghan Airways, the national carrier then controlled by the mullahs. Starting in 1998, according to aircraft registration documents found in Kabul by Afghan officials, Bout’s operation and allied air firms based in Sharjah sold the Taliban military a fleet of cargo planes that was used to haul tons of arms and material into Afghanistan. U.S. officials concluded that the planes also ferried militant operatives, narcotics, and cash. It was a lucrative venture. Western officials estimate the Taliban paid Bout more than \$50 million during the years it ruled Afghanistan.

BOMBS AND RICE

While developing his ties with the Taliban, Bout was also perfecting his sanctions-busting business to the south. Throughout the 1990s, his aging fleet was



INTERNATIONAL AID:
Bout isn't heartless. He delivered disaster relief to those devastated by the 2004 tsunami.

FLOWERS:
Legitimate cargo has included gladiolas bought in South Africa for \$2 and resold in the United Arab Emirates for \$100.

GUNS:
Bout's network dropped thousands of AK-47s in war zones including Afghanistan and Iraq.

20,000 82-mm mortar bombs, 6,300 antitank rockets, 790 AK-47s, 1,000 rocket launchers, and 15 million rounds of ammunition. The total value of the shipments was estimated at \$14 million.

Bout's real money came when he realized he could fly lucrative commercial cargo on the flights back from the weapons deliveries. His most profitable enterprise was flying gladiolas purchased for \$2 in Johannesburg and resold for \$100 in Dubai.

Ever on the lookout for a good business opportunity, Bout even took part in humanitarian operations. In 1993, he flew Belgian peacekeepers to Somalia as part of "Operation Restore Hope," using TransAvia Export Cargo Company, one of his first ventures. A year later, his aircraft flew 2,500 French troops into Rwanda to help slow the ethnic slaughter there. In 2000, he transported hostage negotiators to the Philippines, where European tourists were being held by the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf. He also frequently carried relief supplies from the World Food Programme to impoverished areas in Africa. And in the wake of the massive Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, his planes delivered humanitarian goods and services to Sri Lanka.

THE HUNT FOR VIKTOR BOUT

Ironically, it was Bout's humanitarian flights delivering European aid that eventually led authorities to his illicit activities. Bout decided to expand his network northward in 1995, setting up several airfreight operations in Ostend, Belgium, where Belgian intelligence began investigating him for possible gunrunning. Meanwhile, the CIA was picking up the first reports of his activities in the Great Lakes region of East Africa.

And British intelligence officials in Sierra Leone, worried about how their growing peacekeeping force there would contend with the country's steady weapons flow, quietly set their sights on him, too. "The difference between Bout and the others was that Bout was an integrated operation," says Johan Peleman, a Belgian researcher who was hired by the United Nations to help investigate Bout. "He can source the arms, he organizes the transport, and he can source the financing." His genius was his ability to provide a door-to-door operation from the arsenal to the buyer.

By the late 1990s, Bout had emerged as the personification of the new transnational threat—a highly mobile global enabler, skilled at leveraging his

crisscrossing Africa with weapons for all sides of some of the continent's most gruesome conflicts. "[There was] Sierra Leone and Liberia, a real bleed-out across West Africa," recalls Gayle Smith, who was senior director for African Affairs at the NSC at the time. "The Congo and Angola were still unresolved. And Sudan was heating up. Any one of these conflicts would have been all-consuming by itself. But they were happening all at once, and Bout was a common denominator."

U.N. investigators uncovered a small slice of his activities in Angola. From July 1997 to October 1998, Bout's airplanes flew 37 flights from Burgas, Bulgaria, to Lomé, Togo, with weapons destined for the UNITA rebels in Angola. The cargo included

assets and loyal to no country, deftly operating in several continents and shrugging off international standards. The U.S. government, in particular, grew frustrated by the limitations of international law. After all, domestic laws could not extend to Bout's foreign arms deliveries. To apply pressure, U.S. officials turned to South Africa, where some of Bout's planes had been based, and to Belgium, where police had targeted his companies as part of a wide-ranging money-laundering investigation. But despite high-level requests, South African officials declined to prosecute Bout due to lack of evidence, and the Belgians and Americans failed to find common ground on how to build a case.

Finally, in February 2002, the Belgian government issued an international arrest warrant for Bout, charging him with laundering \$325 million between 1994 and 2001. But by then, Bout was safe in Moscow. Asked if Bout was in the country when the arrest warrant was issued, the Russian foreign ministry said

Bout has said that he did not know—nor did he have any obligation to know—the contents of the long, green crates he ferried into war zones.

no, even though Bout was giving live radio interviews from studios in downtown Moscow. The next day, officials grudgingly acknowledged he might be in Russia but said they had seen no evidence that he had committed any crime, and therefore could not act.

FLYING UNDER THE RADAR

Any momentum to scuttle Bout's business empire quickly fizzled in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Bush administration was almost immediately preoccupied by its invasion of Afghanistan and its wider war on terror. In April 2003, soon after the United States invaded Iraq, American officials began laying the groundwork for a massive commercial airlift. The U.S. military and the thousands of private contractors hired to restore Iraq's shattered infrastructure needed supplies for their mission. By the summer, Antonovs were roaring into Baghdad's cratered airport, ferrying everything from tents and video players to armored cars and refurbished Kalashnikovs.

But to their embarrassment, U.S. officials later learned that many of the Russian planes were operated by companies and crews working for Viktor Bout. His planes were flying Federal Express shipments for the U.S. Air Force, tents for the U.S. Army, and oil field equipment and personnel for KBR, a Halliburton subsidiary. In the months that followed, Bout's flagship firm flew hundreds of sorties in and out of Baghdad, earning millions of dollars from U.S. taxpayers.

How Bout's empire forged its secret U.S. contacts is unclear. But, as U.S. intelligence and military officials believe, the reason may be as simple as Bout having the foresight to position his aircraft in the region. He was able to make his services available in the massive confusion that surrounded the supply operation, when no one had time to check the credentials of the many air operations vying for contracts.

As Bout's contracts became public, and the possible legal implications of continuing to deal with him were explained by the U.S. Treasury Department, the military lurched toward a response. Air Force officials reacted quickly, revoking the fuel allowance and persuading Federal Express to sever its contract. But the U.S. Army and other defense agencies insisted they had no responsibility to scrutinize second-tier subcontractors. Bout's flights for KBR continued well into late 2005, and even expanded to include flights into Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan. Several well-known Bout firms were finally banned from Iraq early this year by military officials. But Bout was suspected of shifting his operations to new firms, and U.S. officials fear that those companies may try to land lucrative U.S. contracts again.

On April 26, 2005, then Assistant Treasury Secretary for Terrorist Financing Juan Zarate announced new U.S. economic sanctions against 30 companies in Bout's financial orbit. Although Bout was not designated as a terrorist himself, Zarate noted that he had profited from supplying the Taliban with military equipment when it ruled Afghanistan—a relationship that connected Bout, at least indirectly, to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. Therefore, U.S. entities were now banned from doing business with any of Bout's companies, even indirectly. Eight months later, the U.S. list was adopted by the full U.N. Security Council's Liberia committee—a move not impeded by the Russian delegation. In theory, the international sanctions should have put an end to Bout's trafficking.

Yet investigators have discovered several newly formed Bout enterprises operating aircraft that are still registered to Air Cess and other companies. Human rights monitors have heard that his planes flew into the northern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo this year. And in January, one of Bout's carriers, Irbis Air Company, bid on a contract with Halliburton in Iraq. Despite the UAE's assur-

ances that it has grounded his fleet, Bout often exploits the fact that U.S. military air controllers on duty in Sharjah, who control traffic into Iraq, rotate jobs every six months. His businesses—including new shell companies registered in Moldova and elsewhere in Eastern Europe—apply for contracts before the new person has time to find out who is designated or what to watch for. “It is a constant

What would the global flow of weapons look like without Viktor Bout? Dozens of traffickers wait in the wings.

Arms Around the World

If Viktor Bout's empire were put out of business, the flow of weapons to the world's trouble spots would not grind to a halt. But it is unlikely that a similar network—a large, vertically structured organization capable of door-to-door delivery of advanced weapons and hardware—would emerge in its place.

Instead, the world of arms trafficking would return to the way it was during the Cold War. No single weapons broker could offer the full range of services that Bout does. There are several reasons why. For starters, the world is more aware of transnational threats today, and a new Bout would likely be spotted and stopped earlier in his career. Although Russia is still awash in weapons and aircrafts, it is no longer the Wild West it was when Bout staked his claim in the early 1990s. Many areas of Africa are now so saturated with weapons (many of which were provided by Bout) that their value has dropped markedly. For example, the price of an AK-47 in the Niger Delta region has dropped from \$250 to \$75 in the past 18 months.

Future operators will likely have to create business models with more middlemen and fewer profits. The more steps there are between acquiring weapons and transporting them, the more opportunities there are for law enforcement or intelligence agencies to break up international weapons cartels. If the profitability of the weapons trade diminishes—in part because of the success of traffickers such as Bout in meeting the market demand—transporting weapons will be just one of several portfolios for illicit air merchants.

Like Bout, future gunrunners will probably have to rely on both legal and illegal cargoes. There is a severe airlift capacity deficit across the world, making ownership of aircraft as valuable as the weapons they carry. That means legitimate business should be economically viable and more competitive with illegal cargoes, though it will not do away with illicit transport networks. The transportation of valuable commodities such as diamonds, coltan, and timber will likely remain lucrative. Nowhere will that prove more true than in Africa, where corruption is endemic, the need to skirt the law for

personal profit remains high, and the viability of truly legitimate operations is precarious.

That is not to say the weapons business will disappear; there are already people positioned to keep the arms pipeline moving. The leading arms smugglers of the future are likely to include some of Bout's former business partners. One such person is Sanjivan Ruprah, who allegedly helped Bout broker several major weapons deals for Liberia's former dictator Charles Taylor and arms for Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. The 40-year-old Kenyan national is on the United Nations' asset freeze list and travel ban for those deals. He was arrested twice (once in Belgium in February 2002 and then in Italy that August), but he skipped bail both times. Ruprah is currently at large (and back in business) in Africa.

He is only one of the many arms traffickers who would try to pick up where Bout left off. Dozens more are waiting in the wings. But none will have the clout or reach of Viktor Bout. “On their best days, [other arms dealers] couldn't influence a war either way. They were peanuts,” says one U.S. official who asked not to be identified because of ongoing investigations of Bout. “Bout could make or break a country.” It may be some time before we see the likes of him again. —DF



Shell game: If Bout were gone, other traffickers would pick up the pieces.

fight, because the military wants to fly stuff and the new people are under pressure, and tracking aircraft ownership is, frankly, not a priority,” said a U.S. official involved in the Bout hunt.

Conceding their difficult straits, U.S. officials admit that there is no clear evidence that Bout’s air fleet has been diminished or his activities slackened as a result of the sanctions. “You never can say with

In the meantime, Bout lives in a luxury apartment complex in Moscow, where he is occasionally spotted eating out at fancy sushi bars. Richard Chichakli, Bout’s American business partner, also moved to Russia, using frequent flier miles to buy a ticket out of Texas after his assets were frozen in April 2005 by U.S. officials, who suspected he was running some of Bout’s businesses from the United States. In



A force for good and evil: Relief supplies for tsunami survivors are loaded onto one of Bout’s planes in Pakistan.

100 percent certainty that he is gone,” says Zarate—who is now President George W. Bush’s chief counterterror deputy at the NSC. “He is very, very good at doing his business.” The Europeans find it equally hard. “He doesn’t go away. He just keeps changing his aircraft and registrations, hoping that he will outlast the interest in following him,” says a European military intelligence source. “So far, he is right.”

THE SIEVE OF GLOBALIZATION

Today, international efforts to pursue Bout have largely been abandoned. The CIA no longer has personnel specifically tasked with following his activities. The Belgian money-laundering investigation has stalled over internal feuding and lack of government interest. Only the British maintain an active intelligence effort to track him, and even that effort is greatly reduced.

theory, neither of them is allowed to go abroad because of a U.N. travel ban. But U.S. officials involved in the Bout hunt say there were credible Bout sightings earlier this year in Beirut. Meanwhile, the Russian government declines to answer any questions about Bout, who reportedly has cultivated close ties with senior military and other government officials in Moscow.

Bout himself has said that he did not know—nor did he have any legal or ethical obligation to know—the contents of the long, green crates he ferried into war zones. Strict economic calculations, not ideology, have been the guiding star of Bout’s operations. But what motivates a man to shove such moral implications aside? Is it the quest for wealth? The adrenaline rush of operating in dangerous circumstances? The knowledge that some of the world’s most powerful people rely on you? “No one else would deliver the packages,” says

one of Bout's South African associates. "You never shoot the postman."

Perhaps the existence of the merchant of death says more about the world today than it does about the man himself. The halting efforts to disrupt his activities tell a chastening story of the failure of nations. Indeed, Viktor Bout is a product of the convergence of history and opportunity, an entrepreneur who saw a chance to turn an incredible profit in a rapidly changing world. In the Cold War, each side was able to enforce adherence to ideological imperatives by controlling the supply and demand of just about everything. When the Berlin Wall came down, so did the controls, and the market was thrown open to those who could seize the moment. Bout grasped that his services could be useful to any party desperately seeking the weapons he could provide. With a growing number of failed and failing states dependent on inexpensive and readily available weapons, Bout was able to craft a transglobal network to meet this market. "If you look at all of Bout's various escapades, how easy it was for him to move weapons, get end-user certificates, and change aircraft registration," says Michael Chandler, a retired British colonel who led a U.N. panel on the Taliban and al Qaeda, "you get an amazing picture of how corrupt many parts of the world are."

Even in today's new world order, where the United States is the sole superpower and old ideologies are diminished, governments have yet to come to grips with the emergence of transnational criminal groups. These armed, nonstate actors disregard borders, dispassionately working with the Taliban and the U.S. military and other unlikely bedfellows, breeding instability and violence for personal profit, not ideology. Traffickers like Bout invented new rules as they went along. Rather than being impediments to the flow of weapons, arms embargos simply allowed them to jack up prices. International "name and shame" campaigns, with no enforcement ability, served only to advertise their services.

Many arms control experts say that if Bout's empire were finally brought to heel, the international weapons business would simply fragment into smaller fiefdoms, similar to the way that the Colombian Cali and Medellín cocaine cartels dissembled in the 1990s after their leaders were killed. What they fail to mention, though, is that the net production of cocaine did not diminish, and the shrunken, tight-knit cartels proved equally difficult to dismantle. Indeed, in today's world, any attempt to halt illicit activities—whether it's trafficking by Viktor Bout or by someone else—can truly be read as the second labor of Hercules. Whenever the hydra's head is cut off, two more grow in its place. **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

Journalist Peter Landesman scored a rare interview with Viktor Bout for his profile of the notorious trafficker in "Arms and the Man" (*The New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 17, 2003).

For information about the rise of weapons dealers and their operations, read *The Arms Fixers: Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents* (Washington: BASIC Publications, 1999) a report by arms trafficking experts Brian Wood and Johan Peleman. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists spent years scouring intelligence reports, government documents, court records, and other public documents for its book about post-Cold War illicit economies, *Making a Killing: The Business of War* (Washington: Center for Public Integrity, 2003). FOREIGN POLICY Editor in Chief Moisés Naím examines illegal trade in the global economy in his book *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers and Copycats are Hijacking the Global Economy* (New York: Random House, 2005).

In May 2002, PBS produced a documentary called "Gunrunners" for its show *Frontline*. The film features several weapons smugglers, including Viktor Bout, and can be accessed online at PBS's Web site. For Hollywood's take on the world of arms trafficking, watch the 2005 movie *Lord of War*, starring Nicolas Cage, a fictional account partially based on Bout's imagined life.

» For links to relevant Web sites, access to the FP Archive, and a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, go to www.ForeignPolicy.com.