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Al Qaeda Linked to Russian Arms Broker

By Stephen Braun, Sebastian Rotella, and Judy Pasternak
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A man in Belgian custody has told U.S. authorities about business ties between the Al Qaeda terrorist network and a Russian arms broker, delivering a breakthrough in long-frustrated efforts to dismantle one of the world's largest weapons-trafficking operations, authorities said.

Belgian and American officials said Friday that Sanjivan Ruprah, a Kenyan diamond mine owner, has offered details to U.S. investigators about business dealings between Al Qaeda and the sprawling arms-trading operation run by Victor Bout, a Russian broker accused of transporting massive quantities of weapons to Africa and Afghanistan in violation of U.N. arms embargoes.

Officials familiar with Ruprah's case and his cooperation with U.S. investigators said his knowledge of Bout's organization could provide vital evidence in learning how terror groups are armed and how international weapons networks operate.

Lee S. Wolosky, a former National Security Council official who headed a U.S. effort to stem Bout's trading, said Ruprah's arrest "is a very significant development in dismantling the Victor Bout organization." Wolosky described it as the "largest arms-trafficking organization in the world."

There were indications, some officials said Friday, that Belgian authorities are on the verge of seeking a warrant for Bout's arrest. One source familiar with the case said it could come "in a matter of days."

Bout has never been charged for his role in clandestine arms trading. International law does not target those who broker arms deals. And governments long have had difficulty building strong cases against Bout, who has used five passports and often moves assets and cargo planes from country to country.

Officials say they are uncertain where Bout is now. Some have suggested that he is in Russia; others say he lives in the United Arab Emirates.

Three United Nations inquiry panels looking into the arming of rebel factions in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Angola have accused Bout of transporting millions of dollars in assault rifles, missile launchers, ammunition and even helicopter gunships. The three panels have a U.N. Security Council mandate to investigate how arms brokers violated sanctions against arms sales to the three war-torn nations.

U.N. investigators have described Ruprah, a Kenyan national who has lived in Belgium for the last year, as a key figure in the arms trade.

Ruprah, who has been cooperating with U.S. authorities for several months, was taken into custody Feb. 8 by Belgian police investigating money-laundering activities there among associates of Bout.

Belgian Public Prosecutor Dirk Merckx, who has been overseeing a three-year investigation into Bout's operation, declined to discuss the details of Ruprah's case, citing a judicial order. But he said that Ruprah's arrest showed how the main inquiry into Bout's activities is gaining momentum.

"I think it was a useful operation," Merckx said of the investigation.

Ruprah was one of five people arrested after raids on 18 residences in Brussels and several other cities. The others detained were two of Ruprah's assistants and two Belgians who were allegedly part of Bout's financial network. According to Johan Peleman, a Belgian expert on arms trafficking, Belgian law enforcement interest in Ruprah stemmed from his role in buying diamonds from mining concessions in Kenya, Liberia and Congo. The Belgian city of Antwerp is an international center of the diamond trade.

But Ruprah also has vast knowledge about Bout's financial dealings, Peleman said.

Belgian investigators have spent the last three years focusing "on money flows associated with Victor Bout through Belgium," Peleman said. Belgian authorities, Peleman said, have examined "thousands of money transfers" flowing from several Bulgarian-based firms and through several African governments through "aviation and handling companies in Belgium that are run by Bout."

Ruprah is being held on charges of money laundering, conspiracy and possession of false documents. The Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* quoted British officials as saying Ruprah had been using a false British passport.

Neither Merckx nor American officials would comment on how the Belgian case against Ruprah might affect his cooperation with U.S. authorities. But Wolosky said he doubts that the U.S. effort would be compromised.

The arrest, Wolosky said, "can only help if what he's saying is true." Under pressure from the Belgians, he added, Ruprah might "provide more information about the scope of Al Qaeda operations."

Although U.S. and Belgian interest in Bout's activities predated the Sept. 11 attacks in America, evidence that his far-reaching arms trading empire might have aided **Osama bin Laden's** terrorist network and Afghanistan's now-deposed Taliban government appears to have heightened both nations' investigative efforts.

According to Peleman, Ruprah told U.S. law enforcement agents that over the last two years, Bout made leasing arrangements with Al Qaeda operatives to ship arms on Ariana Airways, the national airline of Afghanistan.

The Times reported last month that Air Cess, one of Bout's air cargo firms based in the Emirates airport of Sharjah, was hired by the Taliban in 1996 to act as cargo handlers and suppliers for Ariana flights—work that enabled the Taliban to have weapons and military supplies delivered to Afghanistan.

Peleman, who has investigated Bout for the United Nations, said that Ruprah also told him that he had informed U.S. authorities about secret business dealings linking Bout to the illicit diamond trade in Africa. There have been reports in recent weeks that Bin Laden's group made millions of dollars by funneling diamonds mined by rebels in Sierra Leone.

A U.S. official verified that Ruprah had provided information about Bout's contacts with Bin Laden's network. The official said Ruprah has mentioned Bout's activities in funneling arms to Africa and the Russian's involvement in smuggling diamonds from African mines.

But Ruprah's key role is in providing information to the U.S. investigation "looking at potential links to Al Qaeda. That's the direction this has worked in," the official said.

Ruprah has been flown several times from Belgium to Washington in recent months for questioning by U.S. law enforcement agents, Peleman said. Several current and former U.S. officials confirmed that Ruprah has been talking with FBI agents in Brussels and Washington.

Peleman, who has been in contact regularly with Ruprah in recent months, said the Kenyan national told him that he began cooperating with U.S. and British authorities in late September "to get some leverage" and avoid being drawn into the international terrorism investigations that followed the Sept. 11 attacks.

Ruprah has been described by U.N. investigators as a former air transport firm owner who played a key role "in Liberia's airline registry." Bout and other arms traders had often registered their airplanes in Liberia to escape international scrutiny and regulation, Peleman said.

At one point in 1999, a U.N. report concluded, Ruprah was authorized by the Liberian government to act as a "global civil aviation agent worldwide"—but on a later visit to Liberia, U.N. investigators were told by government aviation officials there that they had never heard of Ruprah.

Bout and Ruprah located some business interests in Belgium for several reasons, said Peleman and other officials familiar with Bout's operation.

Both required proximity to Antwerp, a critical dispersal point for diamonds that U.N. investigators say have been repeatedly used by African rebel movements and dictatorships to pay for weapons shipped from former Soviet bloc nations.

Bout also had once based many of his battered old Soviet cargo planes in the airport at Ostend, Belgium. But after his role in providing arms to African hot spots became known, Bout was forced to move his operation in 1997 after Belgian aviation authorities pressured him to leave, according to U.N. investigators.

By then, Bout found a new home for many of his planes in an airport in Sharjah, from which U.S. officials and Afghan sources suspect that he is providing arms to the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The Emirates resisted efforts to dislodge Bout's fleet until last year. But although officials there have since declared Bout unwelcome, there are signs, Peleman and U.S. officials said, that some of his planes are still based there.

Ruprah, who is often seen wearing an old leather coat, had been showing signs of nerves about the Belgian and U.S. inquiries before his arrest, Peleman said. Calling from his suburban Brussels home, Ruprah would often telephone from one mobile phone and direct Peleman to call back on another.

"He clearly knew he was under suspicion," Peleman said.

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Braun and Pasternak reported from Washington, and Rotella from Paris.

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