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Chained together by a dark history

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This Soviet-era Ilyushin cargo aircraft, parked alongside the coastal motorway in Umm al Qaiwain, is part of the mythology that surrounds Victor Bout. **Jeff Topping / The National**

For the past seven years, Andrei Semenchenko's world has been defined by the grey walls of Sharjah's central prison, his horizon framed by fear and hope – fear of the death sentence that hangs over him, and the hope that someone will take pity and come forward with the blood money that could save his life.

Other than visits from his wife, Semenchenko's only connection with the outside world is his small radio. He has lost interest in reading newspapers, except for articles about prisoners who have been granted amnesty.

His wife and their 20-year-old son remain in the city, doing their best to go about their lives, as they have done since June 2002, when Semenchenko was arrested for the murder of Fouad al Joubri, a Syrian interpreter.

Semenchenko claims that he went to Al Joubri's office and found him being attacked by two Chechens: "He was bleeding. I left right away to go to the police. I was arrested. I was told that he died and that I killed him."

He denies this. "I am an innocent man," he says, speaking publicly for the first time since his imprisonment. "I just want to be with my wife and son."

Five thousand kilometres away, in Bangkok, another citizen of the former USSR sits in another prison cell, where he has spent the past year. This is Victor Bout, a Russian citizen who, like Semenchenko, found his way to the UAE in the early 1990s, in search of opportunities following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As yet, Mr Bout has not been found guilty of any crime, but today he faces an extradition hearing that could see him sent to the US for trial on charges including conspiracy to provide material support to a terrorist organisation.

Mr Bout is perhaps better known as the Merchant of Death, the title of the 2007 book about him by Douglas Farah and Stephen Braun.

According to them, he is a "weapons supplier whose... vast enterprise of guns, planes and money has fuelled internecine slaughter in Africa and aided both militant Islamic fanatics in Afghanistan and the American military in Iraq". According to Mr Bout's website, he is "just a normal businessman striving for success" and "is not, and never was an arms dealer".

Whatever befalls Mr Bout, the extent to which his story is entwined with that of Semenchenko remains unclear, but entwined they most certainly are.

Last spring, Mr Bout was the target of a lengthy sting operation by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which tricked one of his representatives into offering to sell arms to what he believed were representatives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). According to an application for an arrest warrant to a New York court by a DEA agent in February 2008, the "farming equipment" discussed included Igla surface-to-air missiles and armour-piercing rocket launchers, which were to be parachuted into Colombia.

Mr Bout travelled from Russia to Thailand in March 2008, when he was arrested by DEA agents in Bangkok. If extradited, tried and found guilty, he faces life in prison in the US.

Mr Bout and Semenchenko were two of a breed, what the authors of Merchant of Death called "Soviet-bloc entrepreneurs who

rose from the ashes of the Cold War", but the link between the two men goes deeper than that.

Semenchenko was born in Ukraine in 1961. Unlike many of his countrymen, including Mr Bout – who, according to his website, served as a translator in the Soviet army – he was spared military conscription because of medical problems.

He says he first came to Sharjah in 1990, working for a tourism agency that brought Russians to soak up the sun on the UAE's beaches. By 1994, he had settled in the emirate, managing a computer outfit until he had enough money to start his own business.

In 1996, he registered a company, the name of which was to become familiar to government agencies around the world as a central part of Mr Bout's complex business empire: San Air General Trading.

"It was easy then," says Semenchenko. "I called it Sun Air General Trading, but someone did not read it right and called it San Air. It was too expensive to change the name."

He says he registered the company in Ajman Free Zone. A report by UN investigators, however, says the company originated in Sharjah Airport International Free Zone, which opened for business in 1995, and transferred to Ajman in 2001. Either way, neither zone will disclose details of the company's ownership history.

Semenchenko opened bank accounts in Sharjah and was ready for business – all kinds of business: "Import, export, repair, auto mechanic, auto spare parts ... anything, really," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

Life in Sharjah was good for Semenchenko and his family. "The Russian community was very small at this time and we were all connected. We would get together at parties and dinners."

Mr Bout was one of the men Semenchenko met regularly at such events. It was not clear to many people, says Semenchenko, who he was, or what he did: "He was always travelling. Sometimes it was better to not ask questions."

According to Merchant of Death, Mr Bout set up his own operation in the UAE three years before Semenchenko, picking Sharjah in 1993 as the headquarters for his burgeoning cargo business and fleet of ageing former Soviet aircraft, which carried all kinds of cargo to challenging destinations in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

In a series of interviews, Semenchenko at first said his company had repaired some of Mr Bout's aircraft. During a later conversation, however, he contradicted this. Their wives had spent time together during the day "but there was no business between us".

But there was at least one piece of business linking Mr Bout and Semenchenko – the sale of San Air.

According to documents seen by The National, by the end of the 1990s the influx of Russians following the collapse of the USSR – and the money they were funnelling in and out of the country – had begun to attract the attention of the UAE authorities.

At the end of 1999, the Central Bank launched an investigation of branches of a bank that had been "very active in opening of accounts by Russian customers".

A bank report dated June 8, 2000, said examiners had discovered 1,186 accounts containing Dh125.3 million (US\$34m), in some cases with "incoming remittances ... not commensurate with the level of disclosed income" and turnover "indicative of money laundering on a massive scale".

Among them, said another report, were five accounts known as "The Semenchenko Group"; transactions in the accounts of "San Air Gen Tdg & Andrii [sic] Semenchenko ... were of large value and no sooner the inward remittance were received these were transferred out. Inward TTs [telegraphic transfers] were to the tune of AED22.1 million and AED2.8 million respectively which were laundered".

The reports also highlighted the account of a company called GMS General Trading, "a part of Semenchenko Group", which on December 28, 1998, received a payment of Dh2m, transferred out on the same day.

In 2000, the Central Bank ordered a number of so-called "Russian" accounts to be closed, including those in the Semenchenko group: two of Semenchenko's personal accounts, two in the name of San Air and that of GMS. Semenchenko says he received a call from his bank in January 2000, asking him to go in and close his accounts. "I was shocked," he says. "I didn't know why or what happened. I took all of my documents with me to show every transaction." It was, he says, clear "that someone was using my account".

He does, however, volunteer an explanation for one payment to a San Air account – Dh200,000 he says he was paid by the Rwandan defence ministry for aircraft maintenance. He denies that any payment into his accounts exceeded that amount.

Semenchenko claims that all the large transactions highlighted by the Central Bank were made after he sold San Air. When first asked, he said he could not recall precisely when he had sold the company, but thought it was at the end of 2000.

Later, however, he said it was as early as March of that year. Nevertheless, the bank documents show that at least one of the

investigated transfers to GMS took place in 1998 and others were made into Semenchenko's personal and San Air accounts before April 2000.

Semenchenko found a buyer for San Air in Sharjah's tight Russian community.

Serguei Denissenko, he says, traded a Jeep Grand Cherokee for the company. According to the United Nations, Mr Denissenko is an associate of Mr Bout.

The names of Mr Bout, Mr Denissenko and San Air are on a UN "asset freeze" list, produced following a 2004 resolution adopted "to prevent former Liberian President Charles Taylor [or] close allies or associates ... from using misappropriated funds and property to interfere in the restoration of peace and stability in Liberia".

The list describes San Air as "the main company behind many of Viktor [sic] Bout's arms shipments into Liberia".

In 2005, the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control placed Mr Bout and Mr Denissenko on its list of Specially Designated Nationals. Mr Denissenko's address was given as "care of" San Air General Trading in Ajman.

In a statement on April 26, 2005, the Treasury said it had "identified 30 companies and four individuals linked to Viktor [sic] Bout, an international arms dealer and war profiteer", who "runs a network of air cargo companies that are based in various countries in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and the United States.

"Today, Bout has the capacity to transport tanks, helicopters and weapons by the ton to virtually any point in the world".

San Air, it said, had played a "key role in supplying arms to Charles Taylor's regime in Liberia and the Sierra Leone rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front", and Mr Denissenko was a "senior Bout manager".

According to a 2001 report by a UN panel of experts investigating Liberian sanctions-busting, a series of payments ranging from US\$174,000 to US\$525,000 were made to a San Air General Trading account in the UAE between June and September 2000, "for arms and transportation in violation of the sanctions".

Semenchenko's name appears on none of the documents issued by the UN or the US, and he continues to insist he had no business dealings with Mr Bout.

Today, as the Russian he says he knew only as "Victor" awaits his fate in Bangkok, such matters are the least of Semenchenko's worries. He remains on death row, unable to afford the blood money that would buy his freedom.

Two months ago the family of the dead man settled on a sum of \$200,000 (Dh734,000). Semenchenko says he cannot lay his hands on that much money: "If I had all this money like you say, why would I be in here? I would pay it and be free."

Sitting in a coffee shop in the Mall of the Emirates, Mrs Semenchenko said she had no doubt that her husband was innocent of murder. She also had no doubt that the blood money was beyond them.

"Millions?" She gave a short, humourless laugh. "No, no. Not us. We are simple people."

She no longer wore her wedding ring, she said, nor even her earrings, because she had "sold them all so I can help to pay for my child's education".

In a letter to The National, her husband wrote that during his years in jail he had read reports in the media about prisoners who, like him, were unable to raise blood money.

"Those reports had amazing results," he wrote. "Within days all of them were paid money by the broad and helpful-minded readers of the UAE.

"So I humbly request you to publish my desperate situation in your newspaper. I hope it would be a life-saving help towards me and my family."

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