ALBANIA OFFERS COLLECTORS: MILITARY'S RUSTING FIGHTER JETS UP FOR AUCTION

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If you want to buy a secondhand fighter jet, Albania's the place to go right now.

The 40 obsolete Soviet and Chinese-made aircraft up for sale once roared over what was Europe's most exclusive airspace. The Albanian pilots were members of an exalted military elite that had its own food-tasters and was tasked by Communist Albania's paranoid regime with deterring countless enemies who never did come to this country on the Adriatic Sea.

Now a NATO member, Albania is auctioning off the rusting jets to pay for modernizing its military and to save space in its air bases. The Socialist government says it has received strong interest from aviation collectors and museums abroad — so much that it pushed back the initial auction date and is considering raising the starting bids, first set at 1.1 million to 1.9 million leks (Cdn $11,700-$20,000).

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AP Photo/Gent Shkullaku

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AP Photo/Gent ShkullakuIn this photo taken on Monday, Feb. 15, 2016 an old Mig-19 fighter jet is photographed at the Rinasi air base, near Tirana.

“It was a surprise for us,” Defence Minister Mimi Kodheli said, noting “a rush” of interest from prospective bidders in the United States, Germany, France, Italy and other countries.

In a corner of the Rinasi air base outside the capital of Tirana, 11 decrepit MiG-17 and MiG-19 jets are parked in neat rows, guarded by two military officers. Their silver-grey paint with the distinctive red, black and red roundels is fading, their tires are flat, the guns are rust-flecked and some of their glass canopies are broken.

Former jet mechanic Vasil Jongari, 55, seemed almost ashamed to show the planes to visiting journalists.

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