6 CAPTIVITY

Life inside the camps

To establish what becomes of foreign fighters once they are captured, JFJ first had to obtain permission from the Ukrainian authorities to interview them. Under the Geneva Conventions, prisoners of war cannot be compelled to give interviews; consent must be obtained and recorded on video before any conversation begins.[115] Each prisoner was made to understand that it was his choice to speak freely or to decline. "These are not ordinary prisons," said Petro Yatsenko, a spokesperson for Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War.[116] "This is a prison camp. They are prisoners of war – detained combatants, not criminal convicts."

The detainees JFJ spoke with agreed with the classification. It mattered to them. "We are not criminals," Nkrumah said. "We were soldiers," added Kanu, the Sierra Leonean.[117] A Togolese prisoner put it simply: "We are waiting."



Prisoners of war speak with a journalist during a JFJ interview at a prison camp in Ukraine on July 30.

Inside the camps, conditions reflected the obligations of the Third Geneva Convention more visibly than in many parts of the documented system. Prisoners received medical care, food, and access to communication channels through the International Committee of the Red Cross. The contrast with the conditions some recruits had experienced inside Russian military units, confiscated passports, locked barracks, undisclosed deployment orders, was obvious to them. During one visit to a Ukrainian POW camp in June 2025, members of JFJ's investigative team met Shaun Pinner and Aiden Aslin. The two British men had fought with Ukrainian forces, were captured in Mariupol in 2022 and were later sentenced to death by a court in Russian-occupied Donetsk before being released in a prisoner exchange.

115 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention), adopted 12 August 1949, entered into force 21 October 1950, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949; Article 13 prohibits compulsion to give interviews; Article 17 governs interrogation and the limits of compelled disclosure. JFJ obtained recorded consent from each prisoner before any interview, in accordance with the Convention's requirements.

116 JFJ interview with Petro Yatsenko, spokesperson, Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War.

117 JFJ interview with Richard Kanu.

Both men have described abuse in captivity. They came to the Ukrainian camp, in part, to see how foreign prisoners captured while fighting for Russia were being treated[118].The contrast was difficult to miss: two former prisoners of Russian-backed forces were now walking through a Ukrainian camp holding foreign fighters captured on the other side of the war.

The exchange exclusion

Nkrumah's frustration, however, does not reflect the full diplomatic record. Ghana and Kenya had both sought the release of their citizens through official channels. Between February 2022 and June 2026, Russia and Ukraine completed multiple prisoner exchanges but no African national has appeared on any exchange list provided by Russia.

Mohamed Salah put the dynamic plainly to JFJ: a foreign recruit captured by Ukraine is, from the perspective of the Russian state, a man whose obligations to that state end upon capture. He has signed his contract, he has been deployed and, in the framework Moscow has constructed, his death or capture is a private matter between him and the contract he signed. He is not a Russian conscript whose family will write letters demanding his return and he is not a politically costly absence – he is, for the system that recruited him, expendable inventory.

The diplomatic gap

African governments have, with two partial exceptions, made no formal effort to secure the release of their nationals through prisoner exchange. In March 2026, Kenyan Prime Cabinet Secretary and Foreign Affairs Minister Mudavadi announced, following a visit to Moscow, that Kenyans held in Ukrainian prisons would be included in subsequent POW exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. The prisoners confirmed that they had been contacted by Kenya's honorary consul in Kyiv and informed of this development. Since then, however, two prisoner exchanges have taken place without any Kenyans being included.

On 6 November 2025, President William Ruto raised the case of a Kenyan prisoner directly with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.[119] Although the intervention demonstrates that head-of-state engagement is available to those willing to use it, it remains unclear what followed these discussions or why the process appears to have stalled.

No other African head of state has publicly made a similar intervention. The other partial exception was Ghana, whose Foreign Affairs minister travelled to Kyiv and publicly announced that an agreement had been reached for the release of two Ghanaian prisoners.

The contrast with non-African governments is sharper still. India submitted formal parliamentary reports on its citizens in Russian service and secured 139 repatriations through sustained diplomatic engagement.[120] Nepal issued a direct public warning to Russia against the recruitment of Nepalese citizens.[121] Both governments operated within the same constraints as their African counterparts – bilateral relationships to preserve, limited consular capacity in Russia, and the absence of any multilateral framework dedicated to repatriating foreign recruits – but they acted anyway.

The grey zone

Not every recruit in the camps had been deceived in the same way. Richard Kanu, the Sierra Leonean military veteran captured in eastern Ukraine, occupies what one investigator on the JFJ team called "the grey zone". His military background was not incidental to his recruitment. The Russian recruiter he met in

118 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEPoMlTqne4

119 On President William Ruto's engagement with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy concerning a Kenyan prisoner, see https://nation.africa/kenya/weekly-review/exposed-secret-russia-war-recruitment-pipeline-putting-kenya-on-the-spot-5281590. On Ghanaian Foreign Affairs Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa's February 2026 visit to Ukraine to meet two Ghanaian detainees, see https://mfa.gov.gh/index.php/minister-for-foreign-affairs-embarks-on-official-visit-to-ukraine-to-engage-president-zelenskyy-on-protection-of-ghanaian-citizens-and-bilateral-cooperation/.

120 https://www.firstpost.com/world/mea-says-139-indians-freed-from-russian-army-two-dozen-still-await-return-14035186.html

121 On Nepal's public warning to Russia, see https://www.reuters.com/world/nepal-urges-russia-not-recruit-its-citizens-into-army-says-six-killed-2023-12-05/.

St Petersburg – where Kanu had been living as a migrant labourer for several years – welcomed his service record. The contract Kanu was offered described logistics work, not infantry combat. But Kanu had spent almost two decades in uniform before leaving the Sierra Leonean army. He understood, more clearly than most recruits, what military contracts look like and what they do not say.

The grey zone Kanu represents matters legally. A recruit like Kanu who knew he was entering some form of military service, even on the basis of misleading representations about his role, occupies a different legal position from one who believed he was going to a security job at a factory or a construction site. The distinction is the degree of informed consent – and it has direct implications for the trafficking analysis examined in Chapter 10.

Identity and verification

When prisoners came forward voluntarily and asked their captors to inform their families, the question of who they were – and which family to inform – was not always straightforward. Some recruits had travelled under aliases. Some had used borrowed or fraudulent passports. Some had multiple names recorded across travel documents, recruitment contracts, and personal communications. The diplomatic verification process JFJ documented – in which a small number of African embassies sent officials to POW camps to confirm the nationality of detainees – was inconsistent in its application and incomplete in its coverage.

Propaganda and consent

The Third Geneva Convention protects prisoners of war from being made objects of "insults and public curiosity". That protection has not always been observed by either party to the conflict in Ukraine.

Russia. JFJ documented multiple cases in which African recruits were forced to pose for photographs and videos in which they smiled, danced, and appeared enthusiastic about serving in the military. The material was later circulated through pro-Russian propaganda channels, X accounts and WhatsApp groups, where it was framed as evidence that Africans were fighting for Russia of their own volition and encouraging others to enlist. Some recruits told JFJ they were forced to act as "influencers", reassuring prospective recruits that joining the Russian military was safe, well paid, and offered a path to citizenship. Some equated them to peace missions, selling support roles, even though the recruit would be sent to the frontline in days. Russia also used military parades and public ceremonies to project an image of international support, presenting the participation of foreign nationals as evidence of their inclusion and commitment to the Russian war effort.

Ukraine. Videos of captured African prisoners released by Ukrainian units drew international attention to allegations that some men had been deceived or trafficked into joining the war. Their publication had the effect of bringing those claims into public view and prompting wider scrutiny of the recruitment networks that had brought Africans to the battlefield.

Some African prisoners captured by Ukrainian brigades told JFJ they were compelled to record messages warning others not to join the war. One prisoner said he was required to repeat the same statement as many as 10 times. Because the Ukrainian soldier directing the recording did not speak fluent English, he said, the message was written in broken English and had to be repeated word for word.

A review of several videos found recurring language. Prisoners praised their treatment after capture, sometimes using nearly identical descriptions of being given bread and water. "When I was captured I told the Ukrainians what I thought they wanted to hear. I just wanted to survive and here I am, sleeping and eating well," one prisoner told JFJ. "I know Russia would not have treated African prisoners the same way."

There is no evidence allowing a direct comparison with how African prisoners would be treated in Russian custody. But the prisoner's fear is set against a well-documented record of abuse.

United Nations investigators have repeatedly documented torture and other ill-treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war held by Russia, including severe beatings, electric shocks, sexual violence, mock executions, inadequate food and denial of medical care.

FRANCIS NDARUA: VIRAL 'SUICIDE BOMBER' CALLS VIDEO INTO QUESTION





A screenshot of Francis Ndarua's photo with an anti-tank mine strapped on his chest as it appeared on a CNN broadcast.

Francis Ndarua's case shows how difficult it can be to establish consent when prisoners' images are used as propaganda.

In January 2026, a video began circulating that appeared to show a particularly brutal episode from the war: an African man in Russian uniform, an anti-tank mine strapped to his torso, being sent towards Ukrainian positions while a Russian-speaking man hurled racist abuse and called him a human "can opener". Posted first to the Ukrainian Telegram channel Exilenova+ on 9 January, the footage was picked up within hours by Anton Gerashchenko, a former deputy interior minister of Ukraine, and from there reached CNN, The Telegraph and, by March, had contributed to a human rights resolution in the European Parliament. By August 2026 the video had been viewed 5.6 million times.

The man in the footage was Ndarua, a Kenyan recruited through Global Face who had believed he was travelling to Russia for security work. By his account, the scene was staged at his captors' request as a deterrent aimed at Africans considering signing up: "They requested me to do that video," he told JFJ. "I come from Africa, and so I take

that bomb and act like this guy is forcing me to go to war, and I keep resisting, so they show it is like how Africans are being used in the Russian war." He agreed to take part, he said, because the scene echoed something he had genuinely lived through: at a river crossing under drone fire, he had stumbled and grabbed what turned out to be a corpse, one of several bodies scattered around him, while a Russian soldier ordered him forward. "I was told there was no surrender. It was hell," he said.

He recorded a second video later; this time, he said, he spoke of his own free will. Ukrainian military units regularly publish post-capture interviews with POWs in this format, and JFJ found the second recording had much the same tenor and presentation as those. What neither video disclosed was that Ndarua was, by then, a POW in Ukrainian custody – not the casualty the first video had implied. His mother, Anne, received a copy of the first video from a Ukrainian phone number on the day it surfaced, with a message urging her to circulate it widely and, cryptically, not to lose hope since her son might still be alive and "in captivity". ZMINA, the Ukrainian human rights outlet, flagged on 15 January that the footage "requires further thorough verification", a caution that went largely ignored as the story spread.

As the video suggested Ndarua's death, Russia moved to confirm it. By May, it had formally notified Kenya that he was missing in action, and his family was contacted by the State Department for Diaspora Affairs to begin the paperwork for a compensation payout of an estimated KSh22 million. Of the 24 men trafficked alongside him, Ndarua is the only one known to be alive; the rest are missing or reported dead. Ndarua spent weeks in a dugout; he was blamed for exposing a Russian position and eventually abandoned by his unit and captured by Ukrainian forces, exhausted and ill.

JFJ traced Ndarua to a prison camp in western Ukraine on 30 July 2026, roughly 250 days into his captivity. He spoke for long stretches, in English and Kiswahili, breaking off periodically to ask whether the team could tell his mother he was alive. A week after this account was first published, Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War responded to JFJ's questions about the first video. It said it held no reliable information about who had recorded the footage, where or when, or how it had entered circulation; that the video was not connected to any of its humanitarian programmes; and that no recording of this kind could have been made at an official Ukrainian detention facility. It did not explain how the video had been made, nor address Ndarua's account that he had been asked to record it, and said it would review the footage further.

Scammers targeting families

The families left behind have also been victims of attempts to exploit them. The International Committee of the Red Cross warned JFJ that scammers have posed as Red Cross staff and extracted money from desperate relatives of prisoners of war and the missing, offering false confirmations of life, fraudulent repatriation services, or supposed bribery payments to Russian or Ukrainian officials.[122] The scam economy has thrived in the vacuum left by African governments' failure to establish official channels of information for affected families. Where institutions have not stepped forward, fraudsters have.

Coffin money – Kenya's compensation industry

A shadowy network of intermediaries is offering compensation and the return of bodies to Kenyan families desperately searching for relatives drawn into Russia's war. The government has yet to explain who qualifies, how the claims work, or whom the families can trust.

JFJ has found that the information vacuum around missing and dead recruits has left their families desperate. Government officials and recruitment agents have been exploiting this. Private Russian intermediaries have approached the Kenyan families of dead recruits with offers to pursue Russian death compensation (collo-

122 Interview with ICRC.

quially called "coffin money"). Relatives have been offered up to US$150,000 within 60 to 90 days in return for commissions of as much as 30 per cent. Families have been asked for passports, birth certificates, DNA, and other sensitive documents, but have not been shown any verifiable mandates, claim forms, registered offices, or clear payment channels. While the recruitment chain profited from these men while they were alive, the compensation chain seeks to profit from their death.

In all the cases in which the relatives were approached, they were also required to stop any public agitation about the fate of their missing relatives.[123]

The middlemen

Even before Nelly Wambui could confirm whether her son is alive or not, a private Russian intermediary offers to help her collect compensation for his death. Her son is among the roughly 1,000 Kenyans whom National Assembly Majority Leader Kimani Ichung'wah said had been recruited to fight for Russia, citing information from the National Intelligence Service. Wambui says her son was promised civilian work but instead ended up fighting in Russia's war against Ukraine. Wambui last heard from him in November 2025. Since then, she says, neither the Kenyan nor the Russian authorities have provided reliable confirmation of his whereabouts or status.

The Russian intermediary, known only as Alexey or Alex, claimed he could secure as much as US$150,000 (about KSh19.4 million) per family within 60 to 90 days. His fee was 30 per cent. At this rate, Alex would receive US$45,000 (about KSh5.8 million) per claim before additional costs for lawyers, travel, or the return of a body. With about 100 affected families in Nairobi, Alex could stand to earn as much as US$4.5 million (Ksh582 million) in commissions, assuming each claim reached the maximum amount and every family used his services.

Alex and his associates already have the names of the people identified as next of kin from the recruits' military contracts and are contacting them, assembling a group of potential beneficiaries to pursue compensation. Alex is a largely anonymous figure. None of the family members interviewed say they have seen his face. During the last Zoom call held on the afternoon of 18 June 2026 and attended by several affected families, Alex kept his camera off, even as he asked relatives to surrender sensitive records. From the very start, the families have been asking Alex for any official communication from Russia's Defence Ministry or military confirming their eligibility for compensation and how to file a claim – yet he has produced none. Nor has he produced an official letter authorising him to act on behalf of the Russian government or military, a registered business address or verifiable credentials for the Moscow lawyer whom he claimed would handle the cases.

Kelvin Ochieng is the Kenyan intermediary working with Alex. He serves as the local point of contact and communicates with families in Kiswahili and Sheng, describing himself on Facebook as the national youth leader of the Mabadiliko Party of Kenya. A Kenyan woman identified only as Winnie is also said to be working with them behind the scenes, although her precise role remains unclear.

In a phone interview on 1 August, 2026, after being contacted for comment, Ochieng said he did not seek to profit from the proposed compensation arrangement. "I'm only trying to help," he said.

"The only part I'm playing is that these are families who had reached out and maybe I had a network that could help." He said any payment would go to Alex, not to him.

To test how the proposed arrangement is presented to an individual family, our reporter contacted Ochieng on 22 July 2026, posing as a relative of a Kenyan man who had travelled to Russia and stopped communicating. The reporter wanted to find out why Ochieng and Alex were seeking sensitive records from the affected families and discussing substantial payments while providing little verifiable information about themselves, and how families could confirm that the promised compensation process was legitimate. Ochieng spoke confidently as he described Alex as a commander in Russia who could help trace the men and process the compensation claims. "Alex is the one helping us," he said. "He is a commander there, so he has been

123 See Rosemary Tollo, 'Death brokers' of Russian-Ukraine war promise millions to grieving Kenyan families, 9 August 2026, https://nation.africa/kenya/weekly-review/-death-brokers-of-russian-ukraine-war-promise-millions-to-grieving-kenyan-families-5551222#story.

helping us know the people who are there and helping in the compensation process." Ochieng did not provide Alex's full name, rank, unit, or official authority to handle compensation claims.

According to Ochieng, the families would be required to provide passports, birth certificates, identification records, and proof of their relationship to the missing men. Ochieng said that the documents were intended to establish a claimant's relationship to the deceased recruit. If they were accepted, he said, the relative could qualify for a visa to travel to Russia. Some relatives would even have to travel to Moscow and stay there for as long as three months and provide DNA samples to help identify their kin's remains. He said Winnie acted as a go-between. Ochieng said Alex, who is based in Russia, would cover the cost of flights and accommodation, while the families would be responsible for preparing and notarising the required documents and paying their own legal fees. The families could hire their own lawyer to represent them during this process.

"Once you have received your funds, you give us our share," Ochieng said. His team in Kenya would take KSh2 million after the money reached the family's bank account. If Alex took the 30 per cent commission described by families, the Kenyan fee would amount to an additional deduction.

But speaking to our reporter, Ochieng gave a different account of Alex's fee, saying he might make a profit of about one per cent after being reimbursed for travel and accommodation. "Even if I wanted a token, how much would they pay me at the end of the day?" Ochieng said. "There's no benefit in somebody's son or relative who has died. So, they'll give the token to Alex while there in Russia. For me, the only thing is just networking with them… I'm only doing my civic duty as a Kenyan in helping them because one way or another, the government has failed us," he added.

"We were lagging behind," Ochieng said. "But in other countries, Alex has taken so many people. That's why I got the connection and I said, 'No, let me chip in and help my people here on the ground so that they can benefit.'"



The questions he fielded were always the same: How can I break my contract? How can I go back home? His answer rarely changed: "Once you sign, it's finished."

Given the financial restrictions affecting Russia institutions, neither Ochieng nor Alex identified the Russian institution that would release the compensation, nor the payment channel through which it would reach Kenya. Given that Kenyan recruits who travelled to Russia often struggled to access the money they were paid and were coerced into handing over power of attorney, the question remains whether any families travelling to Moscow to process compensation payments would ever have control over the money.

Ochieng said the first group of Kenyan claimants could begin travelling in August because many families had already submitted their documents. "So far, we are trying to push our first candidate to see if he can get the compensation from Russia," he said. "His son was taken there, and it has been nearly a year."

Ochieng also said relatives who travelled to Russia might be able to recover the bodies of family members. "Most of these bodies are somewhere in the military morgue," he said. "Once they get there and a DNA sample has been done, it's easy for them to identify the body which is there. Then they help you on how the body can be flown to Kenya."

Asked whether this meant there was an official process for compensation and repatriating bodies, Ochieng said there might be, but asserted that the Kenyan government did not want to make it public. "The Kenyan government doesn't want to help Kenyans," he said. "But if you do your investigation in other countries, you'll find that [their citizens] are getting benefits."

"If you do your analysis well, you'll realise that the Kenyan government is not interested," he added.

Sri Lankan media reported in April 2026 that Russia had agreed to begin procedures to compensate the families of Sri Lankan nationals who died while serving in its military.

Ochieng also said that for a fee his group could arrange the release of a Kenyan held as a POW in Ukraine. He first quoted a fee of KSh1 million. He later referred to a current case that he said would cost KSh3.2 million, without identifying the prisoner involved.

A list provided to the investigative team by Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War identifies five Kenyans in Ukrainian custody: Evans Kibet, Willy Muniu Macharia, Joseph Kabuga, Francis Ndarua, and Aaron Pachenje. Ochieng did not identify the prisoner he said he could help release. "Through the armed networks, the people we work with know one another," he said. "There is someone who knows the commander and tells him: 'This man came from Kenya. This is what the family can pay for his release so that he can return home'."

Since 2022, Ukraine's prisoner exchanges have been handled through state institutions, led by the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Ukrainian officials have also publicly warned families against sharing personal information with unauthorised intermediaries or paying to secure a place on an exchange list.

Alex and Ochieng are not the only ones offering families a private route to information about their kin's whereabouts and possible compensation for their loss. In communications reviewed by JFJ, Festus Arasa Omwamba offered to connect a representative of several affected families with people he said could help them obtain information about their relatives and pursue compensation. Omwamba already has a case pending in the Kahawa Chief Magistrate's Court, in which he has been charged with trafficking 25 Kenyans to Russia through deceptive job offers.[124] He has pleaded not guilty and was, on 24 March 2026, released on a KSh5 million bond. The court ordered him to surrender his travel documents and barred him from leaving Kenya while the case is pending. Omwamba did not respond to questions from JFJ about his role in the discussions with the family representative, the basis for the compensation process he described, whether he had been authorised to assist with such claims, or whether he stood to receive any payment or other financial benefit.

For a man facing criminal charges linked to the fraudulent recruitment of Kenyans to join the Russian military, Omwamba did not appear to see the irony of seeking to position himself between the families of those adversely affected by his activities and unnamed contacts he claimed could provide faster access to information and compensation.

His legal problems seemed not to have deterred him at all, only prompting him to insist that his role remain secret. Speaking at times in English and at times in Sheng, he told the representative: "I want to connect you with a guy who is in the department that handles that thing. Please do not say that I am the one who connected you. If you mention me, the next thing you will hear is that I have disappeared… I am under strict instructions not to speak about these issues," Omwamba said.

He seemed keen to establish the scale of the group. After being told that the group included about 100 families, he asked: "Are they all united?" Omwamba urged the representative to organise the relatives under a chairman and submit their cases collectively. He said doing so could bring the matter to a conclusion and argued that negotiation rather than litigation offered returnees and families a better prospect of obtaining information or payment.

"What is happening now is that the men who went and returned believe they will be paid if they take people to court. That is their biggest mistake. Nobody will pay them. Those people [Russians] prefer diplomacy. What has failed is the attempt to force issues, because they do not like being forced. The returnees should organise themselves and identify who they are. Those whose relatives have not been found should at least obtain records showing who is alive, who has been released and the status of each person." Within two weeks, he said, they could all be "sorted".

124 Criminal Case No. E015 of 2026.

Omwamba did not explain what "sorted" meant – whether it was locating the missing men, opening compensation claims, or arranging for the return of their bodies. "I want to connect you with someone in that department," he said. "You will speak to him directly. He will tell you exactly what to do so that we can help you very, very quickly." Omwamba said relatives would have to travel to Russia to complete the process. "You have to go there," he said repeatedly. "You all have to go."

When the representative asked why the families could not rely on the process being handled by Kenya's Department of Diaspora Affairs, Omwamba questioned whether the official route had produced any results. "Have you seen anyone who has actually been paid?" he asked. He presented his own contact, a man named Sasha, as the faster alternative. "I don't want anyone to broker this. I want you to do it directly. It could pay thirteen million shillings," he said.

In a subsequent call with the family representative, Sasha said the compensation would be transferred through cryptocurrency because it was "the only possible way".

Omwamba also discouraged public scrutiny and emphasised the need for discretion, saying media coverage had made it harder to secure cooperation. He suggested that the Russian authorities did not want to be publicly associated with the recruitment of foreign fighters.

"They don't want to take liability," he said. "The men who went and returned believe they will be paid if they take people to court; that is their biggest mistake. Nobody will pay them... Do not allow this process to pass through a law firm. You will be badly exploited," he said.

At one point, he referred cryptically to an unspecified operation: "This thing was structured," he said. But he did not explain what had been structured, by whom, or for what purpose.

Omwamba also said it was "a very big mistake" to blame the Kenyan government for what had happened. "Because the government didn't send those people. Even if you try to prove that someone in the government sent someone, you can't. You cannot prove it."

Moments later, however, Omwamba described what he said had been direct communication between Kenyan defence officials and families in the early stages of the recruitment. "When this thing started, our government's Department of Defence used to make calls," he said. "They would tell them, 'I'm calling you from the camp here. Your relative so-and-so came here and has fallen.' That's how it was." He said Russian officials had initially shown "goodwill," but that the communication stopped once the issue began receiving media attention.

Omwamba then offered a darker assessment of the forces surrounding the families' search for information and compensation. He said the fate of missing recruits had become entangled with money and politics, and powers far greater than their own. "You need to understand that nobody cares that your relative went there and disappeared," he said. "People are calculating how they can get that money. We are heading into a campaign period."

A new intermediary who identified himself as Igor approached several families whose relatives died in Russia, saying he represented Nasha Derzhava, a Moscow company, and could help secure compensation from the Russian government. Communicating from a Kenyan number, he said each family could receive between KSh10 and KSh15 million, with no upfront payment, after signing documents at the Russian embassy in Nairobi authorising the company to act on its behalf. He said the money would be paid within three to four months and assured the families: "This is not a scam."

Nasha Derzhava's public website primarily advertises travel and concierge services, and JFJ found no public indication that it was authorised to handle compensation claims for foreign military recruits. Calls to the Kenyan number went unanswered.

No answers from Nairobi

These private approaches have gained purchase thanks to the vacuum left by the Kenyan government's failure to provide the families with timely and reliable information about their relatives' fate. At a closed-door meeting on 14 July 2026, Roseline Njogu, Principal Secretary for Diaspora Affairs, acknowledged that officials had not responded adequately to the families' enquiries. She said Kenya was still depending on Moscow to confirm whether individual recruits were alive, injured, detained, missing, or dead.

"We can only give you information based on what the Russian government tells us," she said.

She also confirmed that an official compensation process had begun for some families, even though the government had not published any clear rules or timelines.

"A number of you have received letters from the ministry stating that your relative was probably killed in action and asking you to submit documents for compensation," the Principal Secretary said. "If you received that letter, the claim is already being processed."

Rules governing payments to military families in Russia require documentary confirmation of death or, in cases involving a missing serviceman, a court decision recognising the person as missing or declaring him dead. They also require records establishing the claimant's relationship to the serviceman.

Russia also introduced an expedited court process in 2023 in which a person who disappeared under circumstances suggesting death may be declared dead after six months without information. A person already recognised by a court as missing may be declared dead three months after that ruling. The process still requires a legal application to a court and supporting evidence about the disappearance.

iStories, an independent Russian investigation outlet, estimated that courts declared 921 military personnel missing in Ukraine legally dead during the first two years of the war. It was common for relatives to tell courts that they needed the ruling to obtain Defence Ministry payments, pensions, or inheritance rights. In one case, a Russian family said it had been denied payments without a death certificate. The existing rules do not identify "probably killed in action" as a final legal status that, on its own, guarantees payment.

Njogu did not clarify whether the letters the Kenyan families had received from her office represented only the preliminary collection of documents or whether compensation could be approved before their deaths were legally established. Officials also declined to provide the families with copies of the original communications received from the Russian authorities on which the compensation notifications were based. The ministry also did not disclose the criteria used to select the families to get compensation, or what evidence was used to assess their cases.

Like some of the private intermediaries claiming to offer links to information and compensation, Njogu also urged the families to keep the journalists out of the process. "When you come to seek assistance, it is important that you leave the media outside," she said. "When people hear that you have come with the media to expose them, nobody will help you."

Peter Kamau, a spokesperson for the affected families in Nairobi, said the meeting focused on explaining the government's position rather than addressing the concerns raised by the families. "Going forward, the families remain committed to constructive engagement," Kamau said. "We will continue pursuing every available avenue, including the public petition placed before the Senate by Senator Edwin Sifuna, to ensure that justice is served for all affected families."

Without a publicly announced official decision and communication from Russia's Defence Ministry or the government of Kenya, a family might never know the full value of its claim. It might know only the figure disclosed by the intermediary and the deductions said to have been incurred.

Elsewhere, governments have taken a more active role in helping families navigate the same problems. India has taken a more direct approach. On 31 July 2026, the country's Supreme Court ordered the Ministry of External Affairs to appoint an official to assist the families of those who had been killed, injured, or gone missing after joining the Russian military. The court also directed the government to help them pursue compensation through the Russian embassy, facilitate DNA matching to identify bodies, and assist with repatriation. The intervention stands in contrast to the experience of many Kenyan families.

Nelly Wambui is still in the dark about her son's wellbeing. The Kenyan government has yet to give her a definitive answer.

Note: Nelly Wambui is a pseudonym. Her identity has been withheld because she fears that speaking publicly could jeopardise efforts to obtain information or assistance concerning her son.