4 ENTRAPMENT AND CONTROL

The shift that Kibet describes – from tourist bus to forest camp, from work contract to military uniform, from civilian to conscript – is the central transition in the recruitment pipeline, from deception to compulsion: criminal penalties, passport confiscation, financial control, and the impossibility of exit.

Arrival and processing

On arrival in Russia, recruits were taken to a branch of Promsvyazbank, a state-controlled bank servicing military personnel and the defence sector.[97] A translator with limited English moved them through the paperwork. "Sign here. Sign there." The documents were in Russian. Accounts were opened in each recruit's name.

What many recruits did not understand was that they were also signing powers of attorney, granting intermediaries – handlers they had met only hours or days earlier – access to their bank accounts.[98] Multiple recruits subsequently reported that funds were withdrawn from their accounts without their knowledge or consent. This power-of-attorney arrangement appears to have been a Kenya-specific feature of the pipeline: none of the recruits interviewed by JFJ from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, or Egypt reported being asked to sign similar documents, a comparative finding that distinguishes the Kenyan pipeline from others. In at least one documented case, a recruit discovered only weeks later, through his mobile banking app, that the documents he had signed at the bank had given a third party full access to his finances.

From the bank, recruits were taken to military facilities. Their clothes were discarded and replaced with matching tracksuits and shoes. One recruit said he thought he was going to work as a driver – until he was handed a gun.[99]

The second contract

In Russia, a fresh set of contracts and paperwork was presented. All documentation was written in Cyrillic, untranslated. Pressure was placed on recruits to sign quickly. Russian military paperwork reviewed by JFJ fixed the service term at one year.[100]

Recruits were required to undersign a list of 18 sections of Chapter 33 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, titled "Crimes Against Military Service". The penalties referenced include imprisonment of up to 10 years for desertion, absence without leave, evasion of military service duties, and voluntary surrender. These consequences were not disclosed in writing, or in any language the recruits could read, prior to their arrival in Russia.[101] No recruit interviewed by JFJ said they understood the criminal penalties they were accepting when they signed.[102]

97 Promsvyazbank (PSB) was disconnected from the SWIFT international financial messaging system by the European Union on March 12, 2022. Because PSB serves the Russian military, it operates strictly outside Western financial ecosystems, routing its remaining domestic and cross-border trade through Russia's internal System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) network or alternative shadow networks. In July 2026, the EU enhanced penalties on foreign banks that connect with the SPFS network. A Somali national recruited from within Russia says he was made to open a bank account with Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, which was disconnected from the international SWIFT financial messaging system by the European Union on June 3, 2022.

98 Based on JFJ interviews with Kenyan recruits and recruits from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Egypt, conducted early 2026.

99 FJ interview with recruits and their families.

100 The 18 criminal code sections recruits were required to undersign are listed in full in Appendix IV.

101 Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, Articles 337 (Absence Without Leave), 338 (Desertion), 339 (Evasion by Simulation of Illness), and 352.1 (Voluntary Surrender).

102 Based on JFJ interviews with recruits. On the specific penalties involved, see Appendix IV.

The second contract is the mechanism through which the deception established in Chapter 3 becomes institutionalised. A man who was promised security work in Kenya now holds a Russian military service contract, undersigned with criminal penalties, in a country where he has no passport, no translator, and no means of communication.

Passport confiscation

Passports were confiscated upon or shortly after arrival at military facilities.[103] Recruits who sought to leave were told they would face criminal prosecution under Russian military law. Desertion was effectively impossible: recruits were under constant guard and subject to prosecution for any attempt to leave.

He arrived in St Petersburg on a business visa, overstayed, found work at a Moscow warehouse, and was eventually steered into military enlistment by a police officer threatening detention. For seven months he paid bribes to stay off the frontline – until the commander who had been taking the money was replaced.



Sample of a Russian military service contract document issued by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

103 Based on JFJ interviews.

The financial trap

The financial architecture of the pipeline serves a dual purpose: it enriches intermediaries and prevents recruits from leaving. The two functions are inseparable.

i) **Agency fees.** The Global Face contract reviewed by JFJ set an agency service fee of 1 million to 1.4 million roubles (approximately US$11,700 to US$16,500), payable by automatic deduction from the recruit's Russian bank account within 35 days of signing with the employer.[104] That fee represented between 58 and 66 per cent of the one-time signing bonus. Multiple recruits described the signing bonus in practice as about 1.9 million roubles (approximately US$22,484). After the agency deduction, recruits were left with approximately 900,000 roubles (US$10,650).

Global Face sent at least 500 Kenyan men to Russia. At the contract rate, the company may have earned more than US$8.25 million[105] in agency fees between May 2025 and February 2026 alone. At times, Global Face sent as many as 22 recruits in a single week; at the contract rate, that would have generated between 22 million and 30.8 million roubles in agency fees (roughly US$260,350 to US$364,490) in one week alone. Based on the contracts reviewed by JFJ, recruiters appear to have earned more than US$50 million in agency fees from African recruits overall. In Kenya alone, agency fees exceeded US$18 million.[106]

In Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon, recruits described paying brokers between US$5,000 and US$7,000 to facilitate travel to Moscow. Once there, they made their own way to enlistment centres.

ii) **Salary structure.** The agreement set out a two-tier salary structure. During training, the candidate would receive 40,000 to 60,000 roubles a month (approximately US$473 to US$710). From the second month, the monthly salary would rise to 170,000 to 210,000 roubles (approximately US$2,011 to US$2,485). The document stated that the recruitment agency would recover its expenses and fees from the one-time signing bonus, rather than receive deductions from the monthly salary. In practice, multiple recruits reported that up to 66% of the signing bonus was withdrawn by handlers through the powers of attorney signed at the bank.

104 Rouble-to-dollar conversions at prevailing exchange rate.

105 Figures derived by JFJ from a sample of recruitment contracts, calculated by multiplying the average agency service fee per contract by the documented number of recruits per channel. The $8.25 million Global Face estimate is based on approximately 500 recruits processed by that agency between May 2025 and February 2026. The $50 million continental estimate aggregates all documented recruitment intermediaries across the countries covered in the main report. JFJ estimates that across all intermediaries beyond Global Face, agency fees in Kenya exceed $18 million.

106 Based on JFJ interviews with Ghanaian, Sierra Leonean, and Cameroonian recruits.

iii) **The SWIFT blockade.** International sanctions on Russian banks effectively blocked SWIFT transfers to African countries.[107] Recruits who had travelled to Russia believing they would be able to send money back home found that in reality most could not. To send money home, they had to withdraw cash and rely on informal Hawala-style networks, where funds are moved through trusted intermediaries rather than formal banking channels.[108] Most said they were deployed to the frontline so quickly that they had little or no time to arrange these transfers. The SWIFT blockade – a fact not always disclosed to recruits before departure – trapped wages in accounts that recruits often could not access and could not transfer.

iv) **Injury compensation.** JFJ documented 10 men who received official letters indicating that compensation had been approved or was being processed after they were wounded. Only two managed to leave Russia with even part of the money.[109] Compensation ranged from 100,000 roubles for minor injuries to 3 million roubles (approximately US$35,502) for severe injuries. In November 2024, the Russian government reduced compensation for less severe injuries as the financial costs of the war mounted. In at least one case reviewed by JFJ, a certificate described the injury as a "тяжелое увечье" (grave injury), commonly linked to a lump sum payout of about 3 million roubles. The recruit never received the money.

v) **Bribes.** A recruit's story, as told in full in Chapter 4, demonstrates what these mechanisms look like in practice.[110] He arrived in St Petersburg on a business visa, overstayed, found work at a Moscow warehouse, and was eventually steered into military enlistment by a police officer threatening detention. For seven months he paid bribes to stay off the frontline – until the commander who had been taking his money was replaced. On 19 August 2025, he abandoned nearly a million roubles in his Russian bank account and surrendered to Ukrainian forces. "I thought of my family," he said. "I just wanted to be alive." What it illustrates here is the bribery economy's structural fragility: a temporary reprieve available only to recruits who still had money, and only for as long as the commander who took it remained in place. When the commander changed, the reprieve ended, and the underlying coercion reasserted itself.

The bribery economy that the recruit describes was not unique to his case. Other recruits in 2024 said they paid a 200,000 roubles lump sum to stay away from the frontline, with most saying the money was handed directly to commanders in cash.[111] The existence of a secondary market in which recruits pay to delay their own deployment is evidence of the coercion: no one pays to avoid a job they accepted voluntarily

107 On the sanctions regime affecting Russian banks' SWIFT access and crypto transfers, see https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/ukraine-eu-agrees-exclude-key-russian-banks-swift-2022-03-02_en and https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/07/23/21st-package-of-sanctions-eu-hits-russian-energy-financial-services-and-crypto-hard/.

108 Based on JFJ interviews with recruits and family members.

109 Based on JFJ review of 10 case files of wounded recruits who received official compensation letters.

110 JFJ interview with a POW.

111 Based on JFJ interviews with recruits.

What the financial system achieves

The combined effect of agency deductions, power of attorney fraud, the SWIFT blockade, salary diversion, injury compensation theft, and the bribery economy is a financial system in which:

- The recruit pays to enter the pipeline (pre-departure fees and cash payments to brokers).
- The agency takes most of his signing bonus before he receives it.
- His wages are deposited in an account he often cannot access or operate.
- If he is wounded, his compensation is approved on paper but rarely reaches him.
- If he pays to avoid the frontline, his remaining funds are drained.
- If he decides to leave, he forfeits everything in his Russian bank account – and faces criminal prosecution for desertion.

At every stage, leaving meant forfeiting accumulated earnings, creating a powerful incentive to stay – even when doing so could cost you your life.

The financial trap is only one aspect of the entrapment strategy, which includes a contract signed in a language the recruit could not read, undersigned with criminal penalties he did not understand; a passport held by a commander he could not challenge; a bank account controlled by intermediaries he had met only hours earlier; wages blocked from transfer by sanctions he was not told about; and a military system in which the only language spoken was one he did not know. Each mechanism, taken individually, might have been overcome, but taken together they constituted a system of control that recruits could not escape.

The next chapter describes the men who survived the pipeline long enough to face the choice between their money and their lives.