EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 2022 and 2026, Russia built a transnational recruitment system that enlisted thousands of African nationals into its armed forces through deception, financial coercion, and the complicity of state actors on both sides. Journalists For Justice has investigated this operation across multiple countries, interviewing prisoners of war, serving recruits, returnees, escapees, and the families of those killed or missing. JFJ identifies at least 3,034 African nationals from 40 countries in Russian military service and 502 dead African nationals from 29 countries.[12] The true number is likely higher.

Why it happened. Heavy losses during the early stages of the war created domestic discontent, hence Russia's demand for foreign infantry grew. A series of Russian presidential decrees promulgated between 2022[13] and 2025 formalised the arrangement, offering Russian citizenship to foreign nationals who signed military service contracts.[14] These presidential offers[15] were used to influence the decisions of many African recruits, who filled a structural role: absorbing casualties in infantry assaults and reducing the political cost of losses among Russian conscripts.

The supply of candidates was created by Africa's own economic crisis. Across just seven of the countries whose nationals JFJ interviewed, more than 13 million young men are classified as NEET (not in education, employment, or training).[16] In none of the interviews conducted did ideology or political support for Russia emerge as a motivation for enlisting. The dominant factors were unemployment, family obligation, and the promise of wages far exceeding anything available at home.

How it worked. Recruitment operated through licensed employment agencies, informal brokers, and personal networks that promised well-paid civilian work abroad.

JFJ reviewed three different versions of in-country recruitment contracts. Although their wording and language differed, all presented the opportunity as civilian employment and did not identify the Russian military as the employer.[17] Some did not clearly identify Russia as the destination. The contracts also failed to disclose that candidates would later be required to sign Russian military service agreements.

Recruits were moved on tourist and business visas, in some cases issued within 36 hours of first contact with a recruiter,[18] assembled in apartments or other holding locations before departure and moved in groups. Many candidates had limited incomes, little or no international travel history, and profiles unlikely to support ordinary tourist or business travel without assistance. Brokers monetised that vulnerability by arranging for visas and, in some documented Kenyan cases, newly issued passports shortly before departure. Candidates often paid substantial fees and exhausted scarce family resources before discovering the true nature of the promised work.

Flight records and the accounts of recruits reviewed by JFJ show a pattern of movement from African capitals to Moscow and St Petersburg through major transit hubs including Istanbul, Dubai, Sharjah, Doha, and Addis Ababa. In many cases, recruits waited at layover points for others in their group before being moved onward together.

12 Ukrainian military intelligence data reviewed by JFJ, current as of June 2026. JFJ arrived at this figure after analysing Ukrainian data and conducting its own interviews with recruits, returnees, families of recruits, government sources, and open-source material.

13 See 690 30.09.2022 Presidential decree of the Russian Federation of December 30, 2022 No. 690 "About admission to citizenship of the Russian Federation in the simplified manner of foreign citizens who have concluded contracts for the passage of military service, and members of their families," http://actual.pravo.gov.ru/content/content.html#pnum=0001202209300053.

14 Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation; Decree No. 690 of 30 September 2022; Decree No. 350 of 15 May 2023; Decree No. 10 on 4 January 2024; Decree No. 534 on 31 July 2025; and Decree No. 821, issued on 5 November 2025.

15 Ibid.

16 The International Labour Organization defines NEET as the percentage of the youth population (aged 15 to 24, though sometimes extended up to 29) who are neither in employment nor in any form of education or training.

17 Based on JFJ review of in-country recruitment agency contracts. A sample is reproduced in Appendix II.

18 Based on JFJ review of Russian tourist and business visas and corresponding passport copies. See also Recruitments of Kenyans into the Russian Military, National Assembly Hansard, Wednesday, 18 February 2026 – Afternoon Sitting, p. 11, https://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2026-02/The%20Hansard%20-%20Wednesday%2C%2018%20February%202026%20%28P%29.pdf.

JFJ found that Russia's African recruitment pipeline operated through two overlapping channels. One targeted economically vulnerable civilians with promises of ordinary employment. The other deliberately sought serving and former soldiers, police officers, and people with paramilitary training who could be deployed with less preparation.

In Kenya, recruiters sought former military, police, and National Youth Service personnel. Reporting identified recruits from the Kenya Defence Forces, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations, and other specialised police formations.

JFJ found that this preference for trained candidates also created a market for false credentials. Simon Letaya Ndiema, a recruiter operating in Kilgoris, arranged forged military service certificates for candidates who had never served in the armed forces, enabling them to present themselves as former military personnel and satisfy the recruitment network's requirements.

Some candidates were told that the unusually high promised salaries were connected to an overseas peace support operation comparable to Kenya's deployment in Haiti, rather than frontline service in Russia's war against Ukraine. That explanation made the salaries appear plausible while concealing the true destination and purpose of the deployment.

The pattern extended beyond Kenya. Cameroon acknowledged the unauthorised involvement of serving defence and security personnel in the war and introduced tighter restrictions on their overseas travel. Reporting in Uganda identified military veterans and former private security contractors among those targeted. Individuals with military backgrounds were also identified in recruitment networks involving Ghanaian and Nigerian nationals.

Where genuine military experience was available, recruiters sought it; where it was not, they accepted inexperienced civilians or manufactured the appearance of experience through forged records.

On arrival in Russia, the job offer turned into a military contract. The recruits were taken to a state-controlled bank, made to open accounts, and pressured to sign powers of attorney granting intermediaries access to their funds. They were presented with a second contract in Russian Cyrillic, without translation, binding them to military service under penalty of criminal prosecution.[19] Their passports and personal apparel were confiscated and they were given matching civilian outfits instead. Agency deductions consumed much of the signing bonuses. International sanctions blocked fund transfers home, trapping wages in accounts recruits often could not access.

JFJ followed the money. The recruitment pipeline was not only designed to move men into Russia's war; it was built to make money from them. Across Africa, JFJ estimates that recruitment intermediaries earned more than US$50 million in agency fees from African recruits; in Kenya alone, one licensed agency, Global Face Human Resources Limited, may have earned more than US$8.25 million.[20]

Tracing the money after it entered Russia proved difficult. Sanctions on Russian financial institutions, the use of local bank accounts, and the opacity of the recruitment network made it difficult for JFJ to follow the funds beyond the point of deduction. Recruits and intermediaries told JFJ that some proceeds were believed to have been shared through cryptocurrency, but JFJ could not independently verify those transfers.

What JFJ could establish was the structure of extraction. In Kenya, recruits sent money to the recruiters through the M-Pesa mobile money application before their departure. In Russia, their bonuses and wages were paid into local bank accounts opened under handler supervision. Access to those accounts was controlled through powers of attorney, and large deductions to "compensate all expenses borne by the agent"[21] were made as soon as the money arrived in the account.

19 Russian military service contracts reviewed by JFJ, signed by African nationals in Moscow and Veliky Novgorod in 2024 and 2025. A copy of the signature form listing criminal code provisions is reproduced in Appendix I. This is the master contract-evidence note.

20 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 US$8.25 million Global Face estimate is based on approximately 500 recruits processed by that agency between May 2025 and February 2026. The US$50 million continental estimate aggregates all documented recruitment intermediaries across the countries covered in this report. JFJ estimates that across all intermediaries beyond Global Face, agency fees in Kenya exceed US$18 million.

21 From Clause 3 of the 2025 Global Face Human Resources Limited Agreement for "Job Search and Employment Support Services Abroad."

The money was collected at different points in the chain. In many cases, recruits first paid to register, handing over facilitation fees for visas, travel and accommodation, before discovering that the promised work had become a military contract.

In Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria, brokers secured payment upfront, charging recruits between US$1,500 and US$7,000 in facilitation fees, largely to obtain visas and cover accommodation on arrival in Russia. For many recruits, the visa was the first obstacle. They had limited income, weak travel histories, and profiles that made international travel difficult without the services of a broker.

Brokers monetised that vulnerability. They presented themselves as able to secure documents, arrange travel, and open access to work abroad. But once recruits reached Russia, the arrangement collapsed. Having already paid fees, travelled abroad, and exhausted scarce resources, many faced enlistment not as a free choice, but as the only remaining way to recover the cost of the journey and earn money.

In Kenya, the main money trail leads to former military personnel and Global Face Human Resources Limited, a licensed recruitment agency operating in plain sight. Recruits told JFJ that, before departure, they sent payments through M-Pesa directly to people they identified as agency directors. Once in Russia, financial control shifted to local bank accounts opened under the supervision of handlers. Signing bonuses and wages were paid into those accounts, while powers of attorney gave intermediaries access to the funds. Global Face contracts seen by JFJ imposed service fees of 1 million to 1.4 million roubles (US$11,700 to US$16,500), payable through deductions from recruits' Russian bank accounts. In some cases, those fees consumed as much as 66 per cent of the signing bonus.



After enlistment, some recruits and families encountered another payment system. JFJ found evidence that payments (bribes) were made to intermediaries or commanders to keep recruits in holding areas, avoid assault units, or delay frontline deployment. Recruits and relatives described the practice as an open secret at enlistment centres in Moscow: those who understood how it worked, or had access to people who could negotiate with commanders, had a better chance of buying time away from the frontline.

The pattern was uneven. Ghanaian recruits, according to evidence gathered by JFJ, often took longer to reach the frontline, and most enlisted in Moscow. Kenyan recruits, who mainly enlisted through St Petersburg, were often moved quickly into assault roles and learned of the payment system only after it was too late.

JFJ's investigation found that Kenyan Global Face handlers, as identified by recruits, visited camps in Russia to check on specific recruits. The visits, recruits said, were not welfare checks but to determine who was still alive, missing, injured, or dead.

Around the same time, recruits complained to commanders that wages were missing from their bank accounts. JFJ could not independently verify every transaction, but the reports show how little control recruits had over the money they had been promised.

The banking system deepened the trap. Recruits could withdraw only limited amounts of cash each day, while many were rushed to the frontline before they could gain access to the bonuses and wages paid into their accounts. Thousands of dollars' worth of roubles now sit in Russian bank accounts opened in the names of African recruits. For their families back home, the money is almost impossible to recover. Many do not know which bank holds the account, who controls it, what documents are required, or where to file a claim.

The contract trap. JFJ found that job contracts sat at the centre of the scheme, creating the appearance of consent while concealing the true destination, employer, work, and legal consequences.

Many recruits signed twice. The first contract, signed in-country, presented the arrangement as civilian employment. It did not always identify Russia as the destination and never named the Russian military as the employer. For recruits, the document appeared to confirm that they were travelling for work. The second contract was presented only after their arrival in Russia. In Moscow and Veliky Novgorod, African recruits were given contracts written in Russian Cyrillic, without translation, and pressured to sign. These contracts bound them to one year of military service.

Copies signed by African nationals in 2024 and 2025 contained almost identical language and bore the names of Russian military recruitment officials, including Major I.S. Tekuchev, head of Moscow's military service recruitment station, and Captain I.R. Arsentyeva, head of the Selection Point for Military Service under Contract in Veliky Novgorod. Both were listed as representatives of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

Some documents went further, presenting military service as a pathway to Russian residency or citizenship. JFJ reviewed a bilingual form completed by a Ghanaian recruit who appeared to believe he was applying for citizenship. Asked his motive for concluding a contract with the Ministry of Defence, he wrote: "Helping Russia."

Asked about future plans, he wrote: "Bring my family and stay in Russia and become a Russian citizen." Many African prisoners of war in Ukrainian custody continue to believe that their enlistment entitled them, or their families, to Russian citizenship. Some said they intended to return to Russia upon their release for that reason alone.

> **It's a death contract."**
>
> Kenyan POW Evans Kibet told JFJ

But the fine print carried severe consequences. The contracts required recruits to acknowledge provisions from Chapter 33 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Among the crimes listed are Absence from Unit or Place of Service Without Leave (Article 337),[22] Desertion (Article 338),[23] Evasion of Military Service Duties by Simulation of Illness or Other Means (Article 339)[24] and Voluntary Surrender (Article 352.1)[25]. The penalties for these offences are not disclosed in writing but range from several years' imprisonment to sentences of up to 10 years.

By the time the recruits reached military units and understood what they had signed, they could no longer simply walk away; the legal consequences were severe from the outset. In several African countries, enlistment in a foreign military entity is also a criminal offence, leaving some survivors exposed to prosecution not only in Russia's military system, but at home as well.

As Kenyan prisoner of war (POW) Evans Kibet told JFJ: "This is a death contract."

What it did to people. Training periods collapsed from six weeks in 2023 to as little as three days in 2025.[26] Recruits were deployed as frontline infantry, often advancing ahead of Russian forces, under sustained drone and artillery attack. A JFJ survey of the families of 57 Kenyan recruits found that the average interval from arrival in Russia to death, hospitalisation, or capture was 44 days.[27]

Families learned of the death of their relatives through social media and WhatsApp messages, not through official channels.[28] A list compiled from Ukrainian data and JFJ's own investigations identifies 502 African recruits from 29 countries reported dead after entering Russia's military pipeline.

22 Imprisonment between 6 months to 5 years.
23 Imprisonment between 7 years to 10 years.
24 Imprisonment between 6 months to 7 years.
25 Imprisonment between 3 to 10 years.
26 Per-case data on training intervals: Abdullahi (six weeks); Mburu (three days); full data in Chapter 5.
27 JFJ survey based on 57 Kenyan recruit households. The 44-day mean covers the interval from documented arrival in Russia to confirmed death, confirmed hospitalisation, or capture.
28 See note 1 (Bibiana case).

THE LARGEST RECORDED DEATH TOLLS

Cameroon	104
Ghana	85
Egypt	81
Kenya	76
Nigeria	24
The Gambia	22
Mali	15
Algeria	14
South Africa	10
Senegal	8
Burundi	7
Sudan	7
Zimbabwe	6
Cote d'Ivoire	5
Sierra Leone	5
Morocco	4
Guinea	3
Ethiopia	3
Republic of the Congo	3
Togo	3
Uganda	3
Benin	2
Botswana	2
Zambia	2
Tanzania	2
Tunisia	2
The Central African Republic	2
Gabon	1
Chad	1



The figures are a snapshot, not a final tally. JFJ continued to identify additional recruits and deaths as this report was being prepared for publication, and the numbers are likely to rise further. The true toll across all nationalities is substantially higher. The largest recorded tolls were from Cameroon, with 104 deaths; Ghana, 85; Egypt, 81; Kenya, 76; Nigeria, 24; The Gambia, 22; Mali, 15; Algeria, 14; South Africa, 10; and Senegal, 8. Deaths were also recorded among recruits from Burundi and Sudan, with 7 each; Zimbabwe, 6; Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, 5 each; Morocco, 4; Guinea, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo and Uganda, 3 each; Benin, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, Tunisia and the Central African Republic, 2 each; and Gabon and Chad, 1 each.

Others survived the frontline only to end up in captivity in Ukraine. As of June 2026, Ukraine was holding 32 African prisoners of war from at least 15 countries. The largest group are Egyptians, with seven confirmed prisoners, followed by five Kenyans, three Nigerians, three Ugandans, two Ghanaians, two Togolese and two Cameroonians. JFJ also identified one prisoner each from Sierra Leone, Somalia, Benin, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Morocco, and Algeria. African prisoners of war held in Ukraine have been systematically excluded from prisoner exchanges with Russia, which has never placed an African national on any exchange list. By June 2026, Ukraine reported that 9,606 military personnel and

civilians had been returned from Russian captivity through exchanges and other negotiated releases since the full-scale invasion in February 2022. On 26 June 2026, Ukraine and Russia carried out their 76th prisoner exchange. African nationals were again absent from the lists.

Ghana announced in February 2026 that it had reached an understanding with Ukraine concerning the repatriation of two Ghanaian prisoners. Before agreeing to return, however, the men sought three assurances from their government: that they would not be prosecuted for their involvement in the war; that they would be assisted in recovering their wages and other money held in Russian bank accounts; and that they and their families would receive practical support, including help finding employment, after their return. One prisoner initially withheld his consent while seeking answers to those concerns.

Their requests exposed the same vulnerabilities that had drawn many Africans into the recruitment pipeline in the first place. Returning home offered safety, but not necessarily employment, income, or protection from prosecution. For men who had travelled because they could not support their families, repatriation without economic assistance risked returning them to the conditions that recruiters had exploited.



As of 30 June 2026, no African government had completed the release of its citizens from Ukrainian captivity. Although Ghana had announced that it had reached an agreement with Kyiv to repatriate two of its nationals, the cases had not yet resulted in a completed return. The announcement remained the exception to a wider pattern of limited diplomatic action.

29 See Chapter 1 for full details of the Nyirenda and Tarimo cases.
30 Continental chronology compiled by JFJ from Ukrainian military intelligence data and country-by-country interview evidence; full chronology in Chapter 7.
31 Figures compiled by JFJ from Ukrainian military intelligence data cross-referenced with JFJ-conducted interviews, current as of May 2026.

Where it spread. The recruitment model changed and adapted as it moved across the continent. The earliest cases (October 2022) involved Zambian and Tanzanian nationals recruited from Russian prisons.[29] Civilian recruitment across Africa gained traction in 2023 through Egyptian and Cameroonian networks, then expanded to Ghana and Gambia in 2024, and to Kenya and South Africa in 2025.[30] So far, Kenya accounts for the largest documented contingent (841), followed by Egypt (407), Cameroon (383), Ghana (337), Nigeria (214), and Uganda (108).[31]

Deceptive contracts. It's a basic requirement in contract law (in any jurisdiction) that the terms of a contract are fully disclosed to and understood by all contract parties before they sign, in particular the weaker party in the relationship – in this case the "employee/recruit". A contract that contains "hidden" or "deceptive" terms is not a legally binding contract, as there is no free and informed consent and the engagement is not voluntary. Such a "contract" is null. If indeed the contracts concluded between recruiters and recruits do not disclose to the recruits the true nature of the activities that they will engage in when they arrive in Russia (military activities), then those so-called contracts are legally unenforceable. In this case, the "recruits" would then not be considered military recruits, but rather victims of human trafficking.

Who failed to act. African governments generally responded only after public outcry, securing the return of a negligible number of their citizens and prioritising diplomatic relations with Russia over accountability. In Kenya, a licensed recruitment agency conducted mass recruitment events at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC), in the heart of the government district, while state officials from immigration, criminal investigation, intelligence, and employment services were identified in Parliament as having facilitated the trafficking.[32] None have been prosecuted.[33] Ghana described the trafficking as "youth enlistment".[34] South Africa expressed "heartfelt gratitude" towards Russia.[35] India, by contrast, reported 202 citizens enlisted, secured 106 repatriations, and submitted formal parliamentary reports, [36]demonstrating that assertive engagement is possible without diplomatic rupture.

The African Union (AU) had, as of May 2026, made no resolution, statement, or formal intervention while the European Parliament adopted Resolution 2026/2641(RSP) condemning the practice in March 2026.[37]

Prohibition of enlistment of foreign citizens. For most African nations, enlisting in foreign armies without state authorisation is generally illegal or prohibited, particularly if it involves mercenary activity or fighting against friendly states, or violates national security interests. Both the recruiter and the recruit can be prosecuted, as can operators of planes and ships who knowingly facilitate the passage of recruits to Russia. The laws of South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana explicitly criminalise recruitment without state authorisation and accepting recruitment into a foreign military engaged in war against a friendly state. Almost all African countries involved consider Ukraine to be a friendly state yet did not warn their nationals of the potential for severe consequences.

For example, despite knowing that both Ukraine and Russia had called for Africans to join their respective armies, the Kenyan government failed for four years to publicly state that it was a criminal offence to enlist in, and to recruit for, a foreign military engaged in a war with a friendly state. For a more comprehensive look at specific laws forbidding African foreign enlistment, see Appendix VI Foreign Enlistment Law – selected African countries.

Following a public outcry (see Chapter 1), Russia, in February 2026, introduced a list of countries whose nationals would not be eligible for enlistment in its military. But numerous countries remain unaffected by the restrictions and recruitment continues.

32 See Recruitments of Kenyans into the Russian Military, National Assembly Hansard, Wednesday, 18th February, 2026 - Afternoon Sitting, page 13, https://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2026-02/The%20Hansard%20-%20Wednesday%2C%2018%20February%202026%20%28P%29.pdf.

33 Kenyan Director of Public Prosecutions' public statements.

34 Statement of the Ghanaian Ministry of Foreign Affairs following a technical session with Russia on 14 March 2026.

35 See Al Jazeera, 'South Africa secures return of 11 men lured into Russia-Ukraine war,' 25 February 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/25/south-africa-secures-return-of-11-men-lured-into-russia-ukraine-war.

36 Indian Ministry of External Affairs response to Lok Sabha question December 2025.

37 European Parliament Resolution 2026/2641(RSP) of 12 March 2026 on human trafficking and grave human rights violations linked to the recruitment of non-Russian nationals, in particular from Africa, for Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Full text available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0081_EN.html.