11 FINDINGS

The findings below are based on evidence gathered by Journalists For Justice between 2025 and 2026. That evidence includes interviews with African prisoners of war held in Ukraine, serving recruits, returnees, escapees, and families of the dead and missing; Russian military service contracts; recruitment agency contracts; financial records; visa and travel documents; WhatsApp communications between recruiters, handlers, and candidates; Ukrainian military intelligence data; official government statements; parliamentary proceedings; and open-source material.

A. Scale and geography

Finding 1: At least 3,034 African nationals from 40 countries have been enlisted into Russia's armed forces since October 2022; 502 have been documented as killed in action as at the end of June 2026.

JFJ arrived at this figure by cross-referencing Ukrainian military intelligence data with its own interviews, family testimonies, missing persons information, government sources, and open-source material. Kenya accounts for the largest documented contingent, with 841 identified cases, followed by Egypt with 407, Cameroon with 383, Ghana with 337, Nigeria with 214, and Uganda with 108. Smaller cohorts have been identified across North, West, East, Central, and Southern Africa.

These figures do not establish the full scale of African recruitment. Russia has never published a complete accounting of foreign enlistment, and the true number is likely higher. Ukraine told the European Parliament in March 2026 that Russia had enlisted at least 27,000 foreign nationals in total since the start of the war.

The largest recorded death 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.

Finding 2: The recruitment operation expanded systematically across the African continent between 2022 and 2026, adapting its methods to local conditions as it moved.

The earliest documented African cases involved Zambian and Tanzanian nationals recruited by the Wagner Group from Russian prisons in 2022. Continental civilian recruitment began in 2023, predominantly through Egyptian and Cameroonian networks. By 2024, Ghana and The Gambia had been drawn into the pipeline. Kenya and South Africa followed in 2025.

The model did not remain fixed. It moved from prison recruitment to the exploitation of student populations, from informal brokers to licensed labour agencies, from civilian job offers to official mobility programmes, and from unemployed civilians to active-duty military networks. As scrutiny increased in Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa, Russia introduced a selective "stop list" or blacklist of countries whose nationals would no longer be recruited through the Ministry of Defence. But the restriction was partial. Numerous countries remained outside it, including Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As of mid-2026, the recruitment market had shifted to exploit these countries.

B. Recruitment mechanics and deception

Finding 3: Recruitment across multiple African countries relied on systematic misrepresentation of the nature of the work, the identity of the employer, and, in some cases, the destination.

JFJ documented recruits who were promised work as plant mechanics, security guards, drivers, cooks, logistics workers, factory workers, and cultural festival participants. In-country contracts reviewed by JFJ,

including contracts issued by the Kenyan agency Global Face Human Resources Limited, did not identify the Russian military as the employer and did not disclose the military service contract recruits would later be required to sign in Russia. In the Global Face contracts, the only visible sign pointing toward Russia was the use of Russian roubles as the currency for wages and fees.

In WhatsApp communications obtained by JFJ, a recruiter explicitly assured a Kenyan candidate that foreigners would not participate in military action and would only provide security. In multiple cases documented by JFJ, recruits did not learn that they had been enlisted into the Russian military until they had already arrived at military facilities inside Russia.

Finding 4: Russian state institutions were involved in the recruitment pipeline at multiple points.

Russian consular authorities issued tourist and business visas to recruits, in some cases within 36 to 48 hours of first contact with a recruiter, despite applicant profiles inconsistent with ordinary tourism or business travel. In Ghanaian cases reviewed by JFJ, the inviting organisation listed on visa documents was the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Russian Federation.

On arrival in Russia, recruits were moved into formal state systems. Military service contracts were signed with the Ministry of Defence and executed by named military 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. Recruits were required to open accounts at Promsvyazbank, a state-controlled bank servicing military personnel and the defence sector. A 2024 presidential decree offered a path to Russian citizenship for foreign nationals who signed military service contracts. The Russian embassy in Kenya denied issuing the tourist visas used by Kenyan recruits, but JFJ holds passport copies documenting their issuance.

C. Financial control and inability to exit

Finding 5: Recruitment intermediaries extracted substantial fees from African recruits through a layered financial system. JFJ estimates that agency earnings from African recruitment exceed US$50 million.



1 m to 1.4 m roubles

A contract reviewed by JFJ between a Kenyan recruit and Global Face Human Resources Limited set an agency service fee of 1 million to 1.4 million roubles, approximately US$12,300 to US$17,200, payable by automatic deduction from the recruit's Russian bank account within 35 days of signing with the employer.

The financial architecture of the recruitment system turned the recruit into a revenue source before he became a soldier. A contract reviewed by JFJ between a Kenyan recruit and Global Face Human Resources Limited 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. That fee represented between 58 and 66 per cent of the one-time signing bonus. Global Face sent at least 500 Kenyan men to Russia; on that basis, the company may have earned more than US$8.25 million in agency fees between May 2025 and February 2026 alone.

The formal fee was only one layer. In Kenya, additional pre-departure cash payments to informal brokers ranged from KSh50,000 to KSh200,000, approximately US$390 to US$1,550. In Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon, recruits reported paying brokers between US$5,000 and US$7,000 to facilitate travel. Multiple Kenyan recruits reported that intermediaries withdrew 1 million roubles from their accounts almost

immediately after arrival, before the recruits could meaningfully access the funds. In at least one documented case, recruits were required to sign powers of attorney granting intermediaries access to their bank accounts. Multiple recruits subsequently reported unauthorised withdrawals.

Finding 6: Once inside Russia, recruits were bound by criminal penalties, control of their documents, financial isolation, and geographic remoteness that together made withdrawal effectively impossible.

On arrival, recruits signed contracts presented only in Russian Cyrillic, without translation, and under time pressure. These contracts required recruits to undersign a list of 18 sections of Chapter 33 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The penalties referenced included 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 before recruits travelled to Russia.

Passports were confiscated upon or shortly after arrival at military facilities. International financial sanctions against Russian banks blocked or severely restricted SWIFT transfers to African countries, preventing recruits from sending earnings home and removing one of the primary incentives for their original decision to travel. The combined effect of criminal penalties, passport confiscation, financial isolation, and deployment into remote military zones was to trap recruits inside a system from which they could not meaningfully withdraw.

D. Deployment, casualties, and captivity

Finding 7: Training periods for African recruits shortened dramatically between 2023 and 2025. Among Kenyan recruits surveyed by JFJ, the average interval from arrival in Russia to death, hospitalisation, or disappearance was 44 days.

In 2023, some early African recruits received up to six weeks of training. By 2025, Kenyan recruits received as little as three days of weapons and explosives training before deployment to the frontline. The shortest documented interval from contract signing to frontline deployment was five days: Nigerian recruit Mbah Stephen Udoka signed his contract on 28 September 2025 and was deployed on 3 October 2025. He was killed weeks later.



3days to 6 weeks of training

In 2023, some early African recruits received up to six weeks of training. By 2025, Kenyan recruits received as little as three days of weapons and explosives training before deployment to the frontline

A JFJ survey of the families of 57 Kenyan recruits found that the average time from arrival in Russia to death, hospitalisation, or being declared missing was 44 days. JFJ has confirmed the deaths of at least 76 Kenyan nationals. Ukrainian military officials have stated that most foreign fighters deployed in these conditions do not survive more than one month on the frontline.

Finding 8: As of May 2026, Russia had never placed an African national on any prisoner-exchange list submitted to Ukraine.

JFJ confirmed this through Ukrainian officials, including Petro Yatsenko, spokesperson for Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The prisoner swap of 5/6 March 2026 involved approximately 500 prisoners exchanged between the two sides, but none were African nationals. The largest prisoner exchange of the war, in May 2025, saw 1,000 prisoners released by each side and no African was included.

JFJ interviewed African prisoners of war who said they had never seen an African national leave a prisoner-of-war camp through an exchange. Ukraine has stated that it is open to African governments seeking the repatriation of their citizens directly. As of May 2026, however, no African state had completed the repatriation of a POW from Ukrainian custody through formal exchange mechanisms.

E. State failure and institutional silence

Finding 9: African governments generally failed to prevent recruitment within their jurisdictions, responded only after public outcry, and secured the return of a negligible number of their citizens.

In Kenya, a licensed recruitment agency conducted mass recruitment events at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre, located within sight of the Parliament of Kenya, the Office of the President, the Supreme Court, and the Office of the Governor of Nairobi City County. At the same time, the state's National Industrial Training Authority assessed candidates for Russian job opportunities. JFJ confirmed that between October and December 2025, at least 110 Kenyans were trafficked to Russia in groups as large as 22, passing through Jomo Kenyatta International Airport past counter-trafficking, criminal investigation, intelligence, and immigration officials, carrying brand-new passports containing Russian tourist visas.

Government officials from the Directorate of Immigration Services, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations, the Anti-Narcotics Unit, and the National Employment Authority were identified in the National Assembly as having facilitated the trafficking. Kenya's Foreign Affairs minister did not visit Moscow until March 2026, months after the alarm was first raised. Kenya has not established a repatriation fund, leaving families to seek the return of the sick, the wounded, the detained, and the dead in an institutional vacuum.

Other governments also adopted language and positions that obscured responsibility. Ghana's Foreign Ministry described the trafficking as "youth enlistment" following a technical session with Russia. South Africa expressed "heartfelt gratitude" toward Russia for returning some of its nationals, without attributing responsibility for how they had been recruited or deployed. As of May 2026, no African government official identified as having facilitated recruitment had been prosecuted.

Finding 10: The African Union has made no resolution, statement, or formal intervention on the recruitment of African nationals into Russia's armed forces.

As of May 2026, the African Union had not formally discussed the recruitment of Africans to fight for Russia. The Pan-African Parliament is reviewing the 1977 OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, but that convention does not currently address the recruitment of African nationals as mercenaries or foreign fighters in conflicts outside Africa.



The European Parliament has formally condemned the trafficking of non-Russian nationals, particularly Africans, and the serious rights violations linked to their recruitment for Russia's war in Ukraine.

The contrast with Europe is stark. On 12 March 2026, the European Parliament adopted Resolution 2026/2641(RSP), condemning 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. Meanwhile, the AU remained silent.

F. Legal classification and unmet obligations

Finding 11: The recruitment operation exhibits multiple indicators of trafficking under the Palermo Protocol, but the protocol has not been invoked by any state or international body as of May 2026.

The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means including deception, coercion, fraud, or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation. JFJ's evidence documents recruitment through misrepresentation of the nature of the work and the identity of the employer; transportation across international borders on visas obtained through false pretence; exploitation through forced military service under threat of criminal prosecution; and abuse of the economic vulnerability of young men with limited employment, education, and migration options.

Both Russia and the African states from which recruits originate are parties to the Palermo Protocol. Yet no party has formally invoked the protocol in relation to the recruitment of African nationals into Russia's war. Articles 6 and 8 require states parties to provide victims of trafficking with assistance, including measures for physical and psychological recovery, and to facilitate repatriation with due regard for safety.

The non-punishment principle also applies. Trafficking victims should not be penalised for unlawful conduct they were compelled, coerced, or deceived into committing. This principle is recognised in the OHCHR Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights and Human Trafficking, the UNODC Model Law Against Trafficking in Persons, and domestic anti-trafficking legislation across multiple African states. Recruits who were deceived or coerced into Russian military service should therefore be treated as victims entitled to protection, not as offenders to be abandoned or prosecuted.

Finding 12: Contracts signed by recruits who were deceived about the nature of the work cannot be treated as valid answers to trafficking, repatriation, compensation, or victim protection claims.

A contract whose material terms are concealed or misrepresented lacks the informed consent required for legal validity. Where recruits were promised civilian work, moved on tourist or business visas, then presented in Russia with military service contracts written only in Russian and signed under pressure, the resulting agreements cannot be treated as evidence of free and informed enlistment.

Domestic foreign enlistment statutes do not alter that conclusion. In Kenya, for example, Section 68 of the Penal Code prohibits enlistment in a foreign military without presidential authorisation. Properly applied, that provision confirms the unlawfulness of the recruitment pipeline. It may expose voluntary foreign enlistment to domestic legal consequences, but it cannot fairly be invoked against trafficked or deceived recruits as though they had knowingly volunteered for foreign combat. Nor can it be used selectively against the dead and wounded while recruiters, brokers, agencies, transport facilitators, and public officials who enabled unauthorised enlistment escape accountability.

Russia's reliance on military service contracts and African governments' reliance on foreign enlistment prohibitions both attempt to convert a trafficking and victim protection problem into a private contractual or criminal liability problem. But neither argument succeeds where enlistment was procured through deception, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, or concealment of material terms. Instead, trafficking law and victim protection principles must prevail.

These findings are supported by the evidence presented in the preceding chapters of this report. Where findings refer to quantitative indicators, source documentation including contracts, visa records, financial documents, interview transcripts, official data, and communications records is held by Journalists For Justice.