PART III WHAT THE SYSTEM DOES TO PEOPLE

5 INSIDE THE WAR

Daniel Kariuki knew what he was walking into before he crossed the river.[112] A former Kenya Air Force officer who had resigned from the military eighteen months earlier and lost his business in the July 2024 unrest, he had taken a job described to him as security work paying US$2,000 a month – his full story is described in Chapter 2. But by the time he reached Vovchansk, one of the most contested sections of the front, he understood exactly what the work involved. On 23 August 2025, the day before he was deployed, he sent his mother a WhatsApp message he described as a kind of eulogy – he feared he was a dead man walking. From the moment he landed in St Petersburg to the day he stepped on a landmine – which he miraculously survived – it was fewer than 100 days.

Kariuki's experience – the speed of processing, the brevity of preparation, the immediate exposure to front-line combat – is not an outlier. It is the system operating as designed.

Training, deployment, attrition

The evidence collected by JFJ across nationalities and time periods reveal a consistent pattern: training periods have collapsed, deployment has accelerated, and the interval between arrival in Russia and death, injury, or capture has shortened to a matter of weeks. The data that follows draws most heavily on Kenyan cases, which constitute the largest documented national contingent and the most complete evidentiary record available to JFJ. But the pattern it describes, an ever-faster progression from recruitment to combat, is documented across every nationality in the investigation. What the Kenyan data measures precisely, the Somali, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Nigerian, and South African cases confirm.

In 2023, Adil Abdullahi, the Somali recruit who signed the contract knowingly, received approximately six weeks of training before deployment to the frontline in Donetsk. By 2024, South African and Ghanaian cohorts were receiving two to four weeks. Udoka, a Nigerian recruit documented by JFJ, received five days. By 2025, Mburu, a Kenyan, received three. Evans Kibet, who arrived in Russia in late July 2025, described five days of intensive instruction – weapons handling, grenade throwing, running with heavy armour – before being told he was going to the front.

112 Most likely the Vovcha River (which flows between Shebekino in Russia and Vovchansk in Ukraine), a documented Ukrainian kill zone where drone attacks are indiscriminate. In late 2025, there was a series of unsuccessful attempts by Russian soldiers to cross the Vovcha River, resulting in large-scale deaths and injuries including to African recruits. See map here https://understandingwar.org/map/assessed-control-of-terrain-in-the-kharkiv-direction-december-26-2025-at-130-pm-et/. Reports indicate that as recently as 29 April 2026 Kenyans were still being pushed across the Vovcha River.

Length of Training

Year	Recruit	Nationality	Training Duration
2023	Abdullahi	Somalia	6 weeks
2024	SA/Ghanaian cohorts	South Africa / Ghana	2–4 weeks
2024	Udoka	Nigeria	5 days
2025	Mburu	Kenya	3 days

After processing and minimal training in Russia, recruits were transported to occupied Ukrainian territory, typically by bus or military convoy, under conditions that left them no ability to refuse. The mechanism was consistent across nationalities. JFJ has documented the interval between arriving in Russia and being deployed to Ukraine across Kenyan cases specifically; the data confirms an accelerating compression from weeks to days as the system scaled up.

Documented deployment locations in Ukraine are concentrated along the eastern frontline. African recruits of multiple nationalities have been deployed to Donetsk Oblast, Luhansk Oblast, and Kharkiv Oblast. The primary deployment zone for Kenyan fighters has been the Lyman–Kupiansk axis in Donetsk, while Ghanaian and Cameroonian recruits have also been documented in the Donetsk region and around Vovchansk. Staging areas in Belgorod and Rostov-on-Don within Russia itself serve as transit points before deployment across the border.

African Recruits in Russia's War: Deployment & Transit Corridor

Documented deployment zones, eastern Ukraine, and Russian staging points



Ukrainian military officials have stated that most foreign fighters do not survive more than one month on the frontline. JFJ's research supports this. A survey of the families of 57 Kenyan recruits, the largest sample available to JFJ for any single nationality, found that the average time from arrival in Russia to death, hospitalisation, or being declared missing was 44 days. The same pattern appears to play out across the continent: interviews with Ghanaian, Cameroonian, and Sierra Leonean families describe the same compressed timeline from departure at an international airport to a WhatsApp message informing a family that their son is dead, injured, or has disappeared.

Behind the average timeline are individual intervals that are shorter still. Udoka, the Nigerian recruit who received five days of training, was killed just weeks after signing his contract – the shortest documented contract-to-frontline interval in JFJ's record. Kibet, the Kenyan athlete, crossed into Ukraine approximately 10 days after landing in Russia; within hours of reaching the front, he was surrounded by the bodies of the African fighters who had preceded him. Richard Kanu, the Sierra Leonean veteran, was deployed after two weeks of training and was injured two weeks later. The pattern is consistent: the system processes men faster than it can prepare them for what awaits them, and the men it processes do not last long at the frontline.

The View from inside the machine

Mohamed Salah, an Egyptian national, began his war career as an interpreter.[113] He had left Egypt for Russia at 19, hoping to earn an international certificate to complement his programming degree from Cairo University. When his university documents lapsed, he faced losing the right to remain in the country. Several friends had already enlisted. The military offered a way to extend his residency and potentially obtain citizenship. He knew he was signing up for a war. "No one pushed me to the registration centre," he said. Before deployment, he transferred money into separate accounts and signed documents granting his father authority to access his funds if he was killed. "For us foreigners," he said, "it's not only about us. It's about our families."

On deployment, Salah found himself in a Russian military unit crowded with foreign recruits from Cameroon, Iraq, Egypt, Ghana, and elsewhere – many of them university graduates, some of them doctors. He became an indispensable intermediary, translating orders into Arabic, English, and French, relaying commands under fire, and at times leading small units himself. "I was carrying four people," he said. 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."

He remembered one Cameroonian recruit by name. Fonko was a trained doctor who had been assured he would never fight. "One hundred per cent not going to fight," Salah recalled hearing him say. Salah was later wounded and briefly hospitalised. When he returned, he learned that Fonko had been enlisted and was dead.



Mohamed Salah during the interview.

113 JFJ interview with Mohamed Salah, Egyptian prisoner of war.

An Egyptian friend who had signed up around the same time was also killed early in the fighting, without ever having received his passport or accessed his bank account. “He had nothing,” Salah said. “No chance to use the money. No passport in his hand. Nothing his family can even claim because he didn’t complete the paperwork.” He paused. “I will try to find his family after this and tell them what happened. They deserve to know.”

Salah’s account confirms that the promises made to recruits – of non-combat roles, of citizenship, of financial security – were understood by those within the system to be unreliable: the interpreters, commanders, and administrative staff all knew they were processing human beings faster than they could train, equip, or protect them. The system’s internal logic was only concealed from the men at the bottom of it.

For families still waiting for official confirmation of a death, the uncertainty can make even mourning difficult.

Mourning without a body

The death toll spans the continent. Ukrainian military data reviewed by JFJ documents casualties among nationals of multiple African countries; Cameroon alone accounts for 104 confirmed deaths, according to Ukrainian records, against 16 acknowledged by Russia. In Kenya, 76 deaths have been confirmed by JFJ, yet the government will only admit to 19. Suffice it to say that the true number is much higher than 76 deaths. Across all nationalities, precise figures remain impossible to establish because Russia has never published a complete accounting of foreign casualties and many families have received no official confirmation of death.



Bibiana Waithaka lights a candle on her son’s “grave” during a symbolic burial held in Mukurweini, Nyeri County, on February 5, 2026.

What families across the continent have received instead is information through channels no government ever intended to serve as death notifications. Mothers have learned of their sons' deaths through WhatsApp messages from fellow recruits. Wives have found out through social media posts circulating online. Siblings have pieced together the news from fragments forwarded through informal networks they barely understand. As Bibiana Wangari, the mother of Charles Waithaka Wangari, said of the moment she learned of her son's death: "The whole world knew that my son was dead before his own mother did." Her experience is not unique to Kenya; it is the standard mode of death notification in this war for African families from Accra to Kampala to Freetown.

In that vacuum – no embassy call, no official letter, no body to bury – some families have turned to practices that predate any modern state's obligations. Across several Kenyan communities, including the Kikuyu, Luhya, Meru, and Embu, symbolic burials have long been used when a body cannot be recovered. These rituals offer structure: a way to acknowledge death, fulfil communal obligation, and give mourners a place to direct their grief. For families whose sons died thousands of miles away, the symbolic grave offers something essential – a place for grief to land and a way to close a life otherwise suspended between absence and mourning.

For families with no body to wash, no coffin to lower into the ground, and no grave to visit, the banana stem burial is more than symbolic; it is a final act of duty in the face of absence.

Of all the substitutes for a body that cannot be brought home, the banana stem may carry the deepest cultural resonance. To an outsider, the choice might seem strange. To Dr Jeremiah Nganda, a communications scholar at Daystar University who studies African cultural traditions, it is anything but.[114] "If you look at how the banana trunk looks, it almost looks like a person," he said. "And the behaviour of that trunk as it goes into the soil is also like a person. Because once it's covered, someday it's going to rot. It's going to become one with the soil." The symbolism goes beyond resemblance. A banana plant fulfils its purpose when it bears fruit; once the fruit is harvested, the trunk becomes, in Dr Nganda's words, "essentially useless". In much the same way, when a person dies and the spirit departs, they leave only the remains; what mattered most has gone.

"When someone buries the banana trunk," Dr Nganda said, "it appears that it's kind of like taking almost the shape of a human being. It's able to also rot within some period of time and then it just disappears." In some communities, similar rites have been used using animals, though less commonly and for different reasons. "It's the same thing," he said. "They just want to put it into the ground so that the spirit of this person can feel as if the people have made some significant attempt."

For families with no body to wash, no coffin to lower into the ground, and no grave to visit, the banana stem burial is more than symbolic; it is a final act of duty in the face of absence. It is also an indictment. Does any institution intend to answer for the harm caused by the system described in this report?

114 JFJ interview with Dr Jeremiah Nganda, communications scholar at Daystar University, conducted in Nairobi.