2 THE ECONOMICS OF VULNERABILITY

CASE STUDY: ADIL ABDULLAHI AHMED MOHAMMED – THE PRESUMED 'RUSSIAN' FROM MOGADISHU

2020 – Abdullahi enrols at the University of Somalia to study computer applications but drops out due to financial difficulties. He begins selling wares at a local market in Mogadishu, earning around US$100 a month. Growing up in the city, he says, made a normal life feel out of reach. "Everyone has a gun, like a telephone. If you have a phone, you have a gun."

Mid-2023 – Aged 26, he leaves Mogadishu citing a lack of prospects. As the only son in his family, he says the decision felt like a duty. He leaves behind his parents and his 11-year-old sister in a crowded neighbourhood off Hodan Street. "I couldn't see a future there." He travels to the Eastleigh suburb in Nairobi, Kenya, and applies for a Russian tourist visa, receiving it within a week, a speed that struck him as significant. "With a Somali passport, no one accepts you unless you are a refugee. Not England. Not France." Russia, he felt, asked fewer questions.

> **With a Somali passport, no one accepts you unless you are a refugee. Not England. Not France. Russia asks fewer questions."**
>
> Somali POW Adil Abdullahi Ahmed Mohammed

August 2023 – He flies from Nairobi to Moscow on a three-month tourist visa, having borrowed around US$2,000 from friends to cover his travel and living expenses during his first weeks in Russia. He arrives with no contacts and no assistance. "No agent. No help." He begins searching for work almost immediately, navigating the city with a translation app.

August-September 2023 – After several days walking the streets, stopping at factories and workshops, he finds work at a clothing factory in a city he identifies as Naminsk. He works 12-hour shifts for around US$200 a month, paid in cash, without formal employment documents. When he can no longer afford the hotel listed on his visa application, he begins sleeping on a mattress on the factory floor.

Autumn 2023 – As his visa expiry approaches, he notices military recruitment advertisements posted along streets and bus stops across Moscow, promising bonuses, salaries, and fast-tracked citizenship. He calls one of the listed numbers, is given an address, and arrives to find other foreign men already waiting, some from West Africa, others from Central Asia. Officials photograph and fingerprint him, then hand him a contract in Russian. He photographs it on his phone and translates portions into English before signing. The terms: a one-year contract, a signing bonus of two million roubles (around US$23,600), and a monthly salary of 200,000 roubles (around US$2,366). But for Abdullahi, it is the promise of legal status that seals it. "At least I will have a new passport, a new country, and my own money," he thinks. A Sberbank account is opened in his name and he begins receiving payments in instalments, sending a portion home via Somali remittance networks. "I paid my debts," he says.

Autumn/Winter 2023 – He completes around six weeks of training. The first month is at a base outside Moscow covering weapons handling, battlefield medicine, and drills, followed by around two weeks at a site he identifies as Brusov. Mornings begin with the Russian national anthem. Instructions are relayed through a translator, although not always reliably. He trains alongside recruits from Nigeria, Cameroon, and Ghana. "I had never experienced military life, never held a gun. Everything was new for me." Around three months after signing, he receives a Russian passport – though he is required to hand it to his commander before deployment.



Adil Abdullahi Mohammed during an interview with JFJ at a Ukrainian prison camp.

January 2024 – Four days after reaching the frontline in Donetsk, he and a Russian soldier take shelter in a damaged building. The experience at the front, he says, shifted abruptly from drills to a fight for survival. Ukrainian forces surround the building and call on them to surrender. The Russian soldier goes first, Abdullahi follows.

January-July 2024 – He is held in an underground detention facility in Ukraine with 140-150 other detainees in a space that was clearly built for far fewer people. Two or three men share a bed. Meals are served twice a day. He does not know exactly where he is being held. Alongside the physical constraints, he describes episodes of racial hostility, including derogatory remarks about his skin colour. "Some words, they stay with you," he says.

Mid-2024 onwards – He is moved to a prisoner-of-war camp in Ukraine, spending his days doing duties or working in a small factory inside the compound, waiting to be exchanged for a Ukrainian prisoner. Somalia, he says, is not where he plans to return. He hopes his mother and sister will eventually join him in Russia. Asked if he would warn others against taking the path he had, he is direct: "Everyone has his own issues, his own problems." He pauses. "I have no regrets. Given another chance, I would do the same thing again."

Adil Abdullahi Ahmed Mohammed's case [51] sits apart from many of the accounts gathered by JFJ. He was not promised a civilian job. He did not arrive in Russia believing he was headed for factory or security work, or construction. He knew he was signing a military contract and he understood that it could send him to the frontline.

Abdullahi's experience highlights a different dimension of the same system. His decision was shaped less by deception than by economic calculation. Before enlisting, he had travelled in search of work and spent time in low-paid employment with limited prospects. The military contract offered wages, legal status, and the possibility of citizenship on terms that appeared preferable to the alternatives available to him.

The distinction matters because an explanation based solely on deception is incomplete. Deception helps explain how many recruits entered the system, but it does not fully explain why the opportunity itself attracted interest. The existence of men willing to accept the risks of military service abroad points to broader structural conditions that extend beyond the conduct of recruiters. Those conditions include unemployment, underemployment, limited economic mobility, and the importance of migration as a strategy for individual and family advancement.

51 JFJ interview with Adil Abdullahi Ahmed Mohammed, conducted at a POW camp in Ukraine in May 2025. All quotations attributed to Abdullahi in this report are drawn from this interview unless otherwise noted.

CASE STUDY: DANIEL KARIUKI – YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE

October 2015 — Daniel Kariuki enlists in the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), training at the Kenya Military Academy in Lanet. He is commissioned as a second lieutenant in 2018, later completing advanced flight training in Jordan with the Kenya Air Force. "I know war," he will say later. "I know how to fight."

December 2023 – He resigns from the military and attempts to start over, investing his savings in importing spare parts for motor vehicles from Dubai.

July 2024 – During unrest along the Kirinyaga Road in Nairobi, his car parts shop is burned down. With his investment up in smoke, he begins looking for work abroad.

June–July 2025 – A former Air Force colleague connects him to Global Face recruitment, operating from Chai House on Koinange Street in Nairobi. He is told the job involves security work paying around US$2,000 a month: no academic certificates are required, and no formal briefing is provided. A woman named Florence handles his papers.

2 July 2025 – He boards a Turkish Airlines flight from Nairobi alongside another Kenyan recruit. At the airport, Kariuki photographs the departure screens and sends the images to his family – proof, he thinks, of a new beginning. More photographs follow from Istanbul: the cabin window, the terminal, the aircraft. After an 18-hour layover, they land in St Petersburg. A handler meets them in the arrivals hall, collects their passports, and drives them directly to Promsvyazbank. Within hours of landing, they are seated at desks signing documents in Russian, a language they cannot read. "Everything felt hurried and urgent," Kariuki will say. He later finds out that one of the documents he signed granted a third party access to his bank account.

> **I hear many are going every day. They feel they have no options. But I tell them the truth – Russia is not the solution. You may earn the money, but your family may never see it. And if you die, they will not get it."**
>
> Daniel Kariuki, Kenya

Early July 2025 – After three days in what appears to be the handler's apartment in St Petersburg, they are moved to Veliky Novgorod to sign additional contracts, then they are transferred to Kamenka, the headquarters of a Russian motorised rifle unit. Reality sets in fast. "After we got locked up at Kamenka, that's when reality hit," he says. "This was no security job. We were there for combat." Russian federal payments totalling 1.2 million roubles (about US$14,200) are deposited into his account. By the time he can access the mobile banking app, the money is gone. "The handler took all the money," he says. "I reported it to my commander, but nothing happened."

Summer 2025 – His unit is deployed near Volchansk, close to the Russia-Ukraine border, an area he describes as among the "most dangerous sections of the front". The soldiers are told they will have to cross a river in full combat gear, then sprint across roughly 150 metres of open ground under constant drone surveillance. "You don't walk there," he says. "You run." Positions are watched from above and adjusted in minutes. "If you don't shoot," he says, "you will be shot."

23 August 2025 – Shortly before deployment, he sends his mother a WhatsApp message and asks her to read it carefully. It is, he says, a kind of eulogy. "I knew I was going to cross the river," he says. "I love my daughter so much, and my mother. I was ready to die before them – I should not be the one to bury them." As he recalls the message during the interview with JFJ, his voice breaks.

9 October 2025 – While advancing with his unit, Kariuki steps on a land mine. He believes at first that he can disarm it, but as he bends down to remove his jackknife, it detonates. Shrapnel tears through his right hand and lodges near his ribs and kidney. The blast forces blood into his chest cavity. "I couldn't move the first day," he says. He lies where he has fallen, disoriented and bleeding. The following day, he drags himself back towards the Russian lines. He does not remember how long it takes.

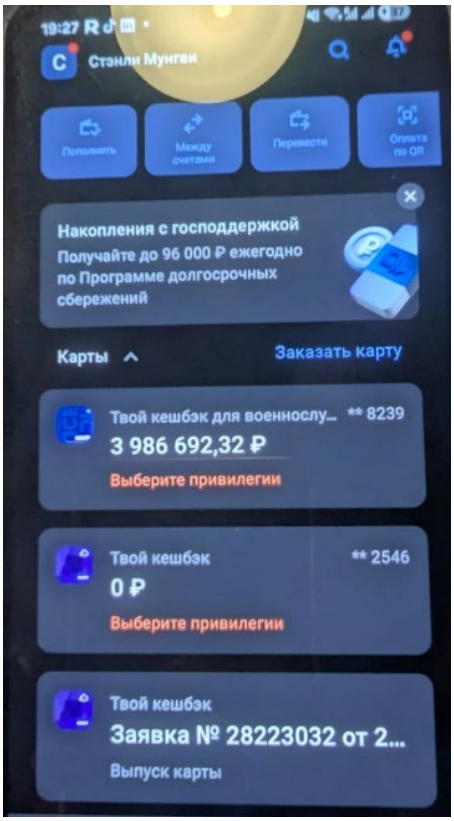
October-November 2025 – He is evacuated to the Vishnevsky Central Military Clinical Hospital in Sergiev Posad, outside Moscow. Doctors stabilise him, remove some fragments, and treat internal bleeding. From the hospital, he sends his mother brief daily videos to show he is still alive. A Russian soldier in the

adjacent bed listens to his story – the documents he could not read, the money he cannot access – and hands him 50,000 roubles (about US$592) in cash. "He said, 'Take it,'" Kariuki recalls. The same man buys him a mobile phone through the online retailer Ozon. Kariuki never sees him again. Before the doctors formally clear him, a member of his unit arrives with orders to return him to Kamenka. He is given 30 days of sick leave. He uses the time to begin planning his exit.

Late November 2025 – With two weeks of leave remaining, he tells his commanders that his wife has come to visit and requests permission to leave the base. The story is false – he is not married – but his injuries are visible and the request is approved. He travels more than 700 kilometres to St Petersburg, obtains a new power of attorney for about 4,000 roubles (around US$47), and begins withdrawing money: 300,000 roubles at the counter, another 300,000 the following day, and 100,000 from an ATM. Nearly four million roubles (about US$47,336) remain in the account. Emptying it at that rate would take weeks and risks drawing attention to himself. He calls his mother – the choice is simple: the money or his life.

Late November-early December 2025 – From a taxi in St Petersburg he calls a number his mother passed to him while he was still in hospital, a contact at the Kenyan embassy in Moscow. The man who answers asks if Kariuki can help another injured Kenyan soldier who also needs to escape. Kariuki agrees. The soldier has no money for a ticket, he learns. He hesitates, then calls his mother for advice. Her counsel is brief: "Treat it like a tithe." He pays about 50,000 roubles for a private taxi to Moscow. "The road to Moscow was risky," he says. "If police stopped us, we would be taken back." The two soldiers arrive after dark and spend the night in a hotel. The following morning, they go to the Kenyan embassy. Consular officials document their presence and issue emergency travel documents but instruct them to buy their own tickets. Kariuki pays for both. That night, they sleep on mattresses on the floor of a small room inside the embassy building.

December 2025 – An embassy contact known only as Fred drives them towards Sheremetyevo International Airport, switching taxis three times. "He was very paranoid," Kariuki says. "He thought we were being followed." At the departure hall, Fred reminds them to use their emergency travel documents and, if questioned, to say they have lost their passports. They approach the counter and hand over their documents. "No one asked us anything…," he says, sounding incredulous.



Daniel Kariuki's bank balance.

At Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, officers from the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) are waiting. Kariuki declines to answer their questions. He has metal fragments still lodged in his body and has returned with less than a quarter of what he earned. The rest – nearly four million roubles in compensation for his injuries – remains in a Russian bank account he can no longer access.

His mother is waiting at the airport. "I cannot describe to you what I felt in that instant; God had brought my son home," she says.

Doctors have recommended surgery to remove the remaining shrapnel near his ribs and kidney. He has not scheduled it because he cannot afford it. His mother says his physical recovery is only part of what he has to face. "He came back alive," she says. "But what he has seen there – that is something you cannot remove with surgery."

Kariuki still keeps the phone the Russian soldier bought for him – the one he used to plan his escape. The balance in his Russian account remains visible through mobile banking. He looks at it sometimes, he says, and considers it not lost income but proof of a life he survived.

CASE STUDY: EIGHT KENYANS LEFT NAIROBI TOGETHER. TWO MET AGAIN IN A UKRAINIAN PRISON CAMP

Our investigative team followed one eight-man cohort from recruitment in Kenya to the war in Ukraine.

WhatsApp messages, payment records, travel instructions, and a Russian military contract allowed JFJ to reconstruct their path through Global Face Human Resources Limited, into the hands of a Russian handler and, within days of arriving, into the Russian military.

Before the men left Nairobi in July 2025, Edward Kamau Gituku sent them a message.

"Dear team," it began.

Eight candidates would travel on Sunday, July 27. They were to report to the airport the evening before.

"Tickets are ready," it said.

Then came the names in the group:

1. Chacha Jones Mairaria
2. Simon Omondi Muga
3. John Murimi Njagi
4. Newton Maliro Nambani
5. Hillary Ligabo Wasa
6. Wilson "Willy" Muniu Macharia
7. Bonface Mugambi Machoki

8 Evans Kibet Sullo

They had paid recruitment fees, undergone medical examinations, and received the same travel instructions. They had been told someone would meet them in Russia.

Within weeks, they would be scattered across the war.

Two routes into the same network

Evans Kibet, 37 had trained as a competitive athlete in Iten and later in Ngong until a hip injury derailed his career.

He made several attempts to return to competition and repeatedly applied for visas to Europe and the United States without success. Eventually, he bought land in Koisunguru, built a home and combined occasional training with farming.

By April 2025, Kibet was again looking for a way forward. He had a daughter to support.

Then another former athlete in Iten told him about an opportunity in Russia: about KSh250,000 a month, tax-free.

Around the same time, Wilson Muniu Macharia, 22, completed his National Youth Service training and returned home to Gaturi, in Kiharu, Murang'a County.

He looked for an internship or a job, but found neither.

A friend and fellow NYS graduate told him about an opportunity in Russia. The offer was being promoted by Isaac Gichuki, whom recruits describe as having a military background.

Macharia says he understood that the opportunity promised a formal contract, substantial pay and the prospect of building a better life after the contract ended.

"First of all, it was for money," he later said. "Then the idea of a good life after your contract had ended."

Kibet and Macharia did not know each other. Kibet entered through an athletics contact and Macharia came through a fellow NYS graduate, but by May, they were sitting in the same recruitment meeting in Nairobi.

Inside the recruitment meetings

During May and June 2025, Global Face Human Resources Limited held frequent recruitment meetings at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre in Nairobi.

Some drew 40 or 50 men. Recruits recalled others with as many as 80.

They had been summoned through WhatsApp messages advertising a "rare opportunity" abroad.

In the room were NYS graduates, former soldiers, prison officers, security personnel, drivers, athletes, traders and men surviving through informal work.

JFJ found that many had connections to military, prison, or security institutions through their own service, former colleagues, or friends. Others, like Kibet, entered through different personal networks.

The recruits were told they were among a lucky few who had been selected — and were warned not to discuss the meetings with "outsiders".

One of the men involved was Edward Gituku. Some candidates already knew him from WhatsApp, where he had been answering questions and helping move recruits through the process.

Another was Festus Omwamba, who appeared to lead the meetings.

Omwamba told the recruits that he had recently returned from Russia, that he travelled frequently between Kenya and Russia, and was a director in an organisation creating employment opportunities for Kenyans there.

If they completed their contracts successfully, he told them, some could rise to senior positions and become as successful as he was.

Murmurs spread through the room. The mood lifted.

The recruits also remember Mikhail Lyapin, a Russian national, being present. They say he handled visas and other Russia-related matters.[52] Isaac Gichuki was also in the room.

Candidates say they were told they could choose among several kinds of military work: driving, guarding facilities, cooking, construction, and operating equipment.

After the speeches, a woman moved through the room carrying what appeared to be a rooming list, checking names and arranging accommodation before the recruits' departure.

The recruits were told they would gather again shortly before travelling for basic Russian language instruction and practical guidance.

Passports, tests, and payments

Macharia and Kibet handed over their passports as their applications were processed.

Candidates were directed through medical examinations, document preparation, visa processing and travel arrangements.

They were instructed to undergo tests for HIV and hepatitis at clinics on a list they were given. The test results had to bear the clinic's stamp, a doctor's signature, and contact details.

Recruits say they paid a KSh50,000 facilitation fee directly to Omwamba through the M-Pesa mobile phone banking service. They were instructed to make additional payments, including KSh3,000 for medical screening, KSh3,000 for legal processing, and KSh4,500 as a commitment fee.

By July, Kibet and Macharia had been placed in the same eight-man travel group.

52 He later came under investigation in Kenya. A Kenyan parliamentary record states that Lyapin was arrested on 25 September, 2025, and **repatriated the following day**. The Russian embassy disputed reports that he had been deported, saying he was questioned by the DCI and then left Kenya according to previously arranged travel plans. In May 2026, the United Kingdom sanctioned Lyapin, citing reasonable grounds to suspect his involvement in the deceptive recruitment of Kenyans through links to **Global Face Human Resources and the Russian embassy.**

'Tickets are ready'

The men received instructions about what to pack, how much cash to carry, and how to communicate in Russia.

They were told to bring solar chargers, power banks, thick socks, bar soap, several phones, and an activated MiFi device.

They were advised to download an offline Russian-language translator and RuStore, an application they were told they would need for banking, and were told to avoid iPhones.They were also advised to carry about $500, but to say they had only $100 if questioned at the airport.

Then came Gituku's message naming the eight travellers. They were to report to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport on July 26 and would fly out the following day.

St Petersburg

On July 27, the group flew from Nairobi through Istanbul to St Petersburg.

A Russian man was waiting for them at the airport. The recruits describe him as a handler and translator who called himself Mulad. He spoke some English, they say, though not fluently.

JFJ later established that Mulad worked with two other men, receiving recruits who had travelled through Global Face Human Resources Limited.

When JFJ showed Mulad's photograph to multiple Global Face recruits, they independently identified him as one of the men who had received them in Russia and accompanied some groups to the bank to open accounts.

That day, the recruits say, Mulad accompanied them through a tightly organised processing schedule: to a Russian military enlistment facility for their contract paperwork, to a hospital for medical screening, and to a bank to open accounts for their military payments.

The sequence closely mirrored Russia's formal process for recruiting contract soldiers, which includes enlistment processing, medical examination and the provision of banking details for military pay.

Russian-language documents were later brought to the men for their signature.

The recruits say Mulad gave little explanation and repeatedly pointed to where they should sign. "Sign here. Sign there," they recalled him saying.

The bank

The men were taken to a Russian bank to open accounts in their names using their passports. They received bank cards and "small phones" that were linked to the accounts. "All the paperwork was in Russian.

The recruits say they did not understand all the documents they were being asked to sign. When some asked what the papers contained, they say Mulad became angry and gestured for them to sign. One recruit says he tried to connect to the internet so that he could use Google Translate to understand the documents being placed before him. Mulad warned him against doing so. The recruits say they nevertheless signed a series of documents they could not fully understand. Only later did they discover that among them were powers of attorney authorising others to act on their behalf. JFJ obtained a copy of one of the powers of attorney, which is reproduced in the appendix to this report.

Their phones became the main way of monitoring money deposited into their accounts. Later, some recruits saw that money had been withdrawn. They say they raised the matter of the withdrawals with their commanders and were told that other people had authority over the accounts.

Military contracts

A second Russian man appeared partway through the processing. The recruits knew him as Ali. Like Mulad, he was easy and friendly in manner, but they described him as the man who appeared to be in charge, giving instructions and directing the process.

When some of the men hesitated or questioned what they were being asked to sign, the recruits say Ali's tone changed. He made it clear, they recalled, that signing was not optional. The contracts were written in Russian. The men say they were given only partial explanations and directed where to sign. By then, they were far from

home and dependent on the people controlling their movements and documents.

A contract reviewed by JFJ was signed through a Russian Ministry of Defence recruitment point in Veliky Novgorod. The official recorded as signing on behalf of the Ministry of Defence was I.R. Arsentyeva.

The one-year contract enrolled the serviceman in the Russian armed forces with the rank of private. The recruits say they were not given complete translations and were directed where to sign. “We were also told that after six months, or once you had completed the contract, you could go home and see your family,” one recruit said.

Macharia says he knew the opportunity involved security work. But as the process unfolded, he became increasingly uneasy.

Kibet says he signed documents he could not read. Before leaving Kenya, he was told he would receive a signing bonus of 1.9 million roubles (about US$22,484) paid in three instalments, a monthly salary of 210,000 roubles ($2,487), and additional equipment allowances.

"On signing the contract, I saw from my mobile phone that the agents had taken one million roubles (US$11,834). I was left with 900,000 roubles (US$10,650)," he said.

The Wagner name

The Kenyans were issued military clothing and taken to a military facility that one recruit described as a Wagner unit. Two Russian men they had not seen before travelled with them in the van, bringing to four the number of Russian men accompanying or handling the group that day. One recruit recalled the men bantering and laughing together in Russian during the journey.

The reference to Wagner is significant, but difficult to verify. By then, the group had been substantially reorganised following its 2023 mutiny and the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Parts of its personnel and operations had subsequently been absorbed into or brought under greater control of the Russian state.

In Africa, some former Wagner operations were taken over by Africa Corps, a structure linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence. JFJ has not established whether the Kenyan recruits had any connection to Africa Corps, whether the facility they described as “Wagner” was formally operated by Wagner personnel, or whether the name was simply being used informally to describe the unit or facility.

A commander took the men’s passports. Macharia says he was told his passport would be returned after he came back from the war. He also says he signed documents connected to Russian citizenship. Kibet describes a similar experience. He too says his passport was taken and that he later learned Russian records identified him as holding both Kenyan and Russian citizenship.

Macharia says Red Cross officials later told him that Russian records also listed him as a dual Kenyan-Russian citizen.

Training

At first, the eight Kenyans remained together. Kibet recalls about five days of military instruction. He was taught to shoot, throw grenades and move while wearing heavy protective equipment.

Macharia estimates that he trained for about two weeks. He compared the experience with his National Youth Service training, except now there were firearms, battlefield movement, and military communications.

The group is broken apart

In August, the Kenyans began complaining about their treatment, access to their money, and the conditions in which they had been placed, according to several recruits.

Soon afterwards, they say, the commanders separated them. Macharia remained with Hillary Ligabo Wasa for some time. Kibet and Chacha Jones Mairaria were moved elsewhere. Newton Maliro Nambani, who had been the most vocal in questioning what was happening, was sent to a different unit.

The others were dispersed among different units.

By August 25, Kibet had been deployed near Vovchansk in northeastern Ukraine. He says he was ill, weak and coughing. A doctor had recommended rest, but after only one day he was ordered back to the battlefield.

He moved through a forest near the Vovcha River with a Russian soldier. Drones hovered overhead. Explosions struck the trees. He saw many bodies scattered on the ground.

Kibet took a photograph of himself beside a tree and sent it to a friend.

“If I die, take care of Chero,” he wrote, referring to his daughter, Cherono.

Then he left the Russian position. He removed his Russian uniform and walked through the night towards the Ukrainian lines.

As he approached several damaged buildings, dogs began barking. Ukrainian soldiers appeared and opened fire as he tried to hide. Kibet stepped forward with his hands raised.

“I am Evans Kibet,” he shouted. A commander ordered the soldiers not to shoot and he was taken into custody. He had been in Russia for less than a month.

Kibet in captivity

Kibet was interrogated, medically examined, and transferred through several Ukrainian facilities.

By October 2025, he had been moved to a prison camp where we interviewed him later that month. A UN representative has explained to him his options: wait for Kenya to claim him, be exchanged with Russia, or wait for the end of the war. "Russia only takes their own people," he says.

Kibet has one clear wish: "I just want to go home. If I am released, my only wish is to see my daughter. I love her so much. She is the first person I would want to see. I am sorry she had to be exposed to all of this."

Macharia at the war front

Four days after Kibet’s capture, Macharia was deployed near Vovchansk. A drone struck near his position on his first day at the frontline, he says, but it didn’t harm him because it got entangled in a tree.

He remained near the front for almost three months, learning to distinguish the sounds of drones and judge when to move and when to hide. He says two Russian soldiers assigned to him were later killed by drones.

Macharia’s family says it lost contact with him on November 15, 2025. Before then, they had sometimes communicated through a phone number belonging to his unit commander.

As the silence stretched on, reports began circulating that Macharia had been killed. His name later appeared in Kenyan media reports listing recruits said to have died in the war.

Back in Kenya, his father, Elias Mbira, refused to accept the reports. He went public, appealing through the media for help and insisting that the family had received no proof of his son’s death.

The reports were wrong.

On November 22, Macharia and the Russian soldiers in his unit suddenly encountered two infantrymen fleeing from a drone. Within seconds, there were several drones overhead. One attempted to drop explosives through the trees as another one descended.

Macharia ran, but a blast struck him before he could get far, sending fragments tearing into his right leg. He abandoned his radio and other equipment so that he could move faster.

Then he saw a smaller drone with a light. Macharia initially thought it belonged to the Russians and followed, but it led him toward Ukrainian soldiers, who took him prisoner.

His capture did not resolve his uncertainty about what happens next. Macharia told JFJ that he feared that returning directly to Kenya could expose him to arrest because of his service in a foreign military.

“What if I go back to Kenya and I’m detained?” he asked.

The fear is not unfounded. Kenyan law criminalises unauthorised service in a foreign military, although it provides a defence where the enlistment was not voluntary. In April 2026, the government told Parliament that it was extending an amnesty to Kenyans who disengaged voluntarily, while also warning that those involved could in future face prosecution.

For recruits like Macharia, that leaves a difficult question: will they return home as offenders, or as people who were deceived and trapped in a recruitment system they could not freely leave?

The video

A video made after Macharia's capture later circulated publicly. In it, he appeared to warn other Africans against joining Russia's war.

Macharia says he was told what to say and was required to record several takes while injured and distressed.

JFJ has not independently established the circumstances in which the video was produced beyond Macharia's account. Questions sent to the Coordination Headquarters about the circumstances surrounding the recording went unanswered.

Together again



Evans Kibet (left) and Wilson Muniu Macharia (centre) during an interview with JFJ at a Ukrainian POW camp.

Kibet and Macharia eventually ended up in the same prison camp in western Ukraine.

They had entered the recruitment operation through different contacts.

They left Nairobi in the same eight-man group.

They were received in Russia through the same network, opened bank accounts, signed Russian-language documents, and initially trained together.

Then they were separated.

Kibet was captured in August, while Macharia came into Ukrainian custody nearly three months later. They were eventually reunited.

JFJ has traced the fate of several members of the group of eight men that left Kenya on 27 July, 2025.

Chacha Jones Mairaria was killed in a drone attack that Kibet says he witnessed.

Newton Maliro Nambani was injured, hospitalised for three months and later returned to Kenya.

Hillary Ligabo Wasa was killed in the war.

JFJ has not established the current status of Simon Omondi Muga, John Murimi Njagi, and Bonface Mugambi Machoki.

What began as one organised journey out of Nairobi for eight men has ended with the men scattered across Russia's war in Ukraine.

CASE STUDY: JOSHUA KWAKU NKRUMAH – THE GHANAIAN EDUCATION SEEKER



Joshua Kwaku in his previous job at Dubai Airport.

2019 – Kwaku arrives in Dubai after paying a recruiter in Accra for a job that does not materialise. He finds cleaning work instead, eventually securing a position at the Dubai International Airport with the Emirates Fire and Rescue Company. He works his way up to supervisor. Ambitious, he sets his sights on a university degree. "In my whole career, I've wanted one day to become the president of Ghana," he will say later.

Early 2024 — He applies to study in Canada. The visa is rejected. He then applies to Synergy University in Moscow. The acceptance letter arrives quickly, and so does the visa – approved less than a week after he submits his application in Dubai.

5-6 July 2024 – He flies from Dubai to Moscow, only to find he has missed the university's enrolment deadline. His 30-day notice period at his Dubai job has eaten up the time. Stranded and unable to return to his former position, he stays with acquaintances in Moscow's Butovo district, where he meets a Nigerian man called Kylian. Kylian offers what sounds like an attractive alternative: security work tied to a long-stay visa and a salary of 195,000 roubles (about US$2,307) a month.

10 July 2024 – Kwaku and Kylian visit what he describes as a civil defence office. He has a medical examination, opens a bank account, and signs a one-year contract. "Kylian told me not to worry," he says. "Just security." A bus arrives the same day, carrying Russians and other foreign nationals, including Chinese men. It drives them to a base he calls Abaga. "It was only then I realised that I had signed up for war." He protests and asks to leave. A supervisor tells him he will have to wait for transport back to Moscow. The bus never comes. He trains for two weeks before being moved to Rostov for weapons instruction. "I didn't see any way out," he says. "Seeing other Africans there… I surrendered everything to God."

Over one million roubles (about US$11,834) appear in his bank account in instalments. With international sanctions restricting official financial channels, he uses trusted Ghanaian contacts within his unit to send money home, instructing his sister to donate part of it to an orphanage. "I knew what I was doing was not good," he says. "By sending part of my bonus to the children's home, I thought maybe God could forgive me."

3 September 2024 – He calls his sister to tell her his unit is being moved to the frontline and sends a short message to Salome. Then he disappears. His family will hear nothing more for eight months.



I signed a contract for citizenship, I have proof. I thought it was a security job."

Ghanaian PoW Joshua Kwaku Nkrumah

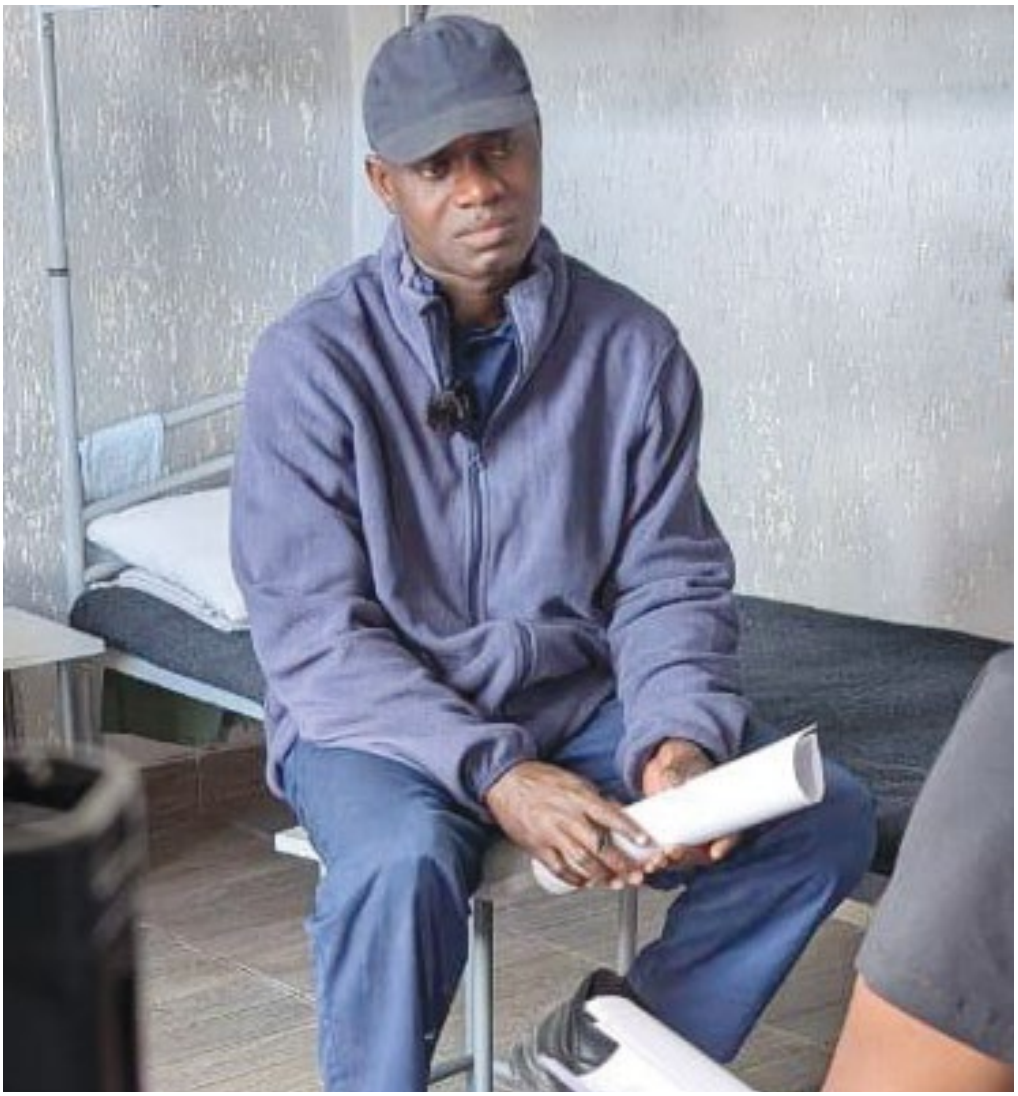
9 September 2024 – He sends a final photograph of himself in military gear to his sister and his partner, Salome, who is five months pregnant. That same day, he is deployed to the frontline in a tank unit of 12 men. A drone strike destroys the vehicle almost immediately: "Eight members of my unit died on the spot." Wounded, he hides in ruined buildings for days before moving towards smoke he believes marks a friendly position. Ukrainian soldiers capture him and give him water and medical treatment. He is later confirmed captured in the Donetsk region in early September 2024.

In Dubai, Salome faces pregnancy alone, dealing with severe medical complications, including bleeding. She quits her job and returns to Kenya, where she is hospitalised for two months: "I almost died. The baby almost died," she recalls. Their daughter, Azin, is born premature and underweight but survives.

26 May 2025 – The investigation team visits a prisoner-of-war camp in western Ukraine. Kwaku steps forward voluntarily when detainees are asked if they will speak to journalists. He agrees to talk for the first time. His opening request is not about himself: "Please send her a voice note," he says, reciting his sister's number from memory. "Tell her I'm still alive. Call Salome too. Ask if it was a boy or a girl." Eight months have passed since he last communicated with his family and he does not know if the baby survived, its name, or whether Salome can afford rent or her next meal.

He explains why he agreed to be identified on camera, having initially asked for his face to be obscured. "If no one knows I'm here, I won't be on the list. Nobody is fighting for Africans." He is referring to the prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. By his account, he has never seen an African leave the camp – including after the largest prisoner swap of the war in May 2025, when 1,000 inmates were released by each side. Ukrainian officials confirm that Russia has never placed African nationals on the exchange lists it submits for negotiations.

Kwaku maintains he never intended to fight. "I signed a contract for citizenship," he says. "I have proof." He had photographed the papers at the military registration centre in Moscow and sent them to a relative. Copies reviewed by the investigation team include sections in English and confirm that after one year of service, citizenship would be granted. "I thought it was a security job."



Joshua Kwaku during an interview with JFJ at a Ukrainian prison camp.

At the end of the interview, he shakes the hand of the Ukrainian videographer on the team. "I am very sorry," he says. "I hope the Ukrainian people will forgive me."

23 September 2025 – The investigation team meets Salome in Nairobi. She is unemployed and living with relatives, her savings exhausted. She has no plans to join Kwaku in Russia even after his release; her focus now is on raising their daughter. "He believed he was doing this for us," Salome says. "And yet here we are."

23 October 2025 – During a camp visit, the team shows Kwaku a photograph of Salome and his newborn daughter taken at her family's home in Nairobi. Tears stream down his face. "My daughter," he keeps saying. "My daughter. Isn't she beautiful?"

25 February 2026 – Ghanaian officials, led by the Foreign Affairs minister, speak with Kwaku by Zoom at about 15:00 before later visiting the prisoner-of-war camp in person at around 1:00 am They tell Kwaku and the other Ghanaian detainee that they will be repatriated.

30 July 2026 – Kwaku is still waiting. Five months earlier, Ghanaian officials told him he would soon be repatriated. “I hope they have not forgotten about us,” he says. “I cannot wait to meet my daughter.”

CASE STUDY: RICHARD KANU – THE SIERRA LEONEAN ARMY VETERAN

2006 – Kanu enlists in the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF), beginning a 17-year military career. He is deployed to districts including Koinadugu and Kambia, plays for the military football team, and after Sierra Leone's 2018 elections, is selected for the presidential guard and posted to the vice president's security detail near the State House.

Late 2023 – Following a change of government, a former military colleague turned Deputy Minister for Internal Affairs accuses Kanu of political disloyalty and warns him he does not belong in sensitive security posts. Kanu feels threatened. He tries and fails to obtain visas to Europe. Russia, he concludes, is the only option remaining. "I just wanted to leave the country." Through a contact in Guinea, he is introduced to a man he knows only as Mr Harry, who speaks vaguely about "programmes" that can secure a Russian tourist visa. Kanu pays around $7,000 covering the visa, accommodation, and flights, borrowing from siblings based in the UK. He travels from Sierra Leone through Conakry, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Dubai.

27 November 2023 – He arrives in St Petersburg. No one meets him at the airport. Instead, a text message instructs him to wait in a certain spot for a taxi. By the time the vehicle arrives, it is dark and cold. He must hand over an additional $1,500 to a man he can barely see.

2 December 2023 – Kanu is taken to a hostel-like building and told to stay in his room. After three days, documents written in Russian are placed before him. There is no translator. He signs them anyway, photographs the pages, and sends them to the intermediary. On 7 December, calls begin arriving from an unfamiliar Russian number. He forwards it to Harry. The response is swift: the contract has been accepted. Next will be two weeks of training.

> **I don't want money anymore; I don't want contracts. I don't want war⚓ Just tell my people that I am still alive."**
>
> Richard Kanu, Sierra Leone

9 December 2023 – He is sent by train to Rostov alongside five Russian-speaking recruits, the only African in the group. On arrival at a military facility, their passports are collected. That's when he realises this is a military camp. He messages Harry, insisting there's been a mistake. The reply is brief: he has signed a one-year contract and nothing can be done. When he keeps pressing, his messages stop being delivered. His UK relatives who try to intervene are also cut off. He learns from fellow recruits that the contract promises a sign-on bonus of one million roubles (US$11,834) and a monthly salary of around 200,000 roubles ($2,366). He later finds only around half the bonus – about 500,000 roubles – in his account, but he can't transfer any of it home.

January 2024 – After two weeks of training alongside Russian nationals he says were recruited from prison, he is deployed to the frontline near Donetsk. His account of combat is detailed: drones overhead, suppressing fire, orders to advance across open ground. At one point he is ordered forward with only two others towards positions defended by tanks. "They wanted us to take a position with the tanks," he says. "I told them, this is not possible." He fears the consequences of outright refusal – "If I don't, maybe they will shoot me from behind," he thinks, so he advances.

9 February 2024 – Less than three months after arriving in Russia and around two weeks into frontline deployment, he is injured in a blast during a retreat under drone fire. Unable to run, he moves alone through damaged buildings, reciting Psalm 23 from a pocket Bible. The following morning, Ukrainian soldiers find him. His first question is whether they intend to kill him… They do not.

2024–2025 – More than 15 months on, Kanu remains a prisoner of war in Ukraine, transferred between facilities and held for periods underground. There is no clear path out – prisoner exchanges have so far primarily involved Russians, not foreign nationals. He fears that if returned to Russia, his contract could be automatically renewed under wartime rules.

His tone across three interviews shifts between pragmatism and frustration – at Russia, at the recruiter, at the contract he could not read. His case sits in a grey zone: unlike those who say they were deceived with no prior military experience, Kanu is a trained soldier who recognised a military camp when he saw one. Yet he insists that what drove him to Russia was escape, not combat.

CASE STUDY: 'KWABENA' – GHANAIAN BUSINESSMAN-TURNED-POW

For seven months, Kwabena* stayed alive in Russia's military recruitment pipeline by paying bribes – until the commander who was taking his money was replaced.

7 July 2024 – Kwabena arrives in St Petersburg from Accra carrying a return ticket and $600 in cash. His visa, reviewed by the investigation team, was issued as a short-term, single-entry business document. He tells his wife "Adjoa"* he is travelling to purchase a printing press for his small business in Ghana – he is looking for work after unsuccessful attempts to secure employment in the UK. At the airport, a woman connected to the agent who arranged his travel drives him to a three-bedroom apartment where two other Ghanaian men are already staying. There is one bed between the three of them, so Kwabena sleeps on the floor.

Mid-July 2024 – Uneasy with the arrangement after three days, Kwabena leaves for Moscow, where migrants have told him he can find day work at a warehouse operated by online retailer Ozon. By now his visa has expired. There are frequent police inspections near the warehouse. Several African fighters interviewed for this investigation describe the same pattern: encounters with officers that end with cash bribes to avoid detention. So Kwabena pays. One officer who has taken money from him several times eventually proposes an alternative. "He said there are jobs," Kwabena recalls. "Military jobs… soft jobs." Facing detention or deportation, Kwabena agrees.

Late July 2024 – Two weeks after his arrival in Russia, Kwabena is at an enlistment centre signing a contract written in Russian. He photographs the documents and sends them to Adjoa. "Just in case," he writes. She is alarmed, but he reassures her that he understands the risks and would be careful. His passport is surrendered to his commander shortly afterwards and returned around three months later.

Money begins arriving in Accra through MoMo transfers, becoming a primary source of support for the family alongside Adjoa's teacher's salary. The couple speak nearly every other day. School fees are paid and repairs made to the family home; relatives believe he is doing civilian work.

Late 2024 – Kwabena learns at a military processing site that foreign recruits can pay to avoid being sent to the frontline. "There was a number," he recalls. "If you send money to that number, you will not go to the war." He transfers 400,000 roubles (about $4,733) from his Russian account – part of his signing bonus. For months, the arrangement holds. He remains behind the lines performing non-combatant duties: digging trenches, cutting trees, packing supplies. Adjoa loses direct contact with Kwabena but is in regular WhatsApp communication with a man who claims to be his commander, who sends reassuring updates: Kwabena is "at the training ground" and "everything is fine". Kwabena later tells the investigation team he believes these messages were connected to his payments.

Early 2025 – The unit commander is replaced. "Everything changed," says Kwabena. The new officer does not recognise the bribery arrangement. Kwabena is issued with combat gear, given a rifle and explosives, and sent to the front. He describes being moved forward in stages, drones overhead, bodies along the line – many of them black people.

19 August 2025 – Kwabena runs. He abandons nearly a million roubles remaining in his Russian bank account and surrenders to Ukrainian forces. "I thought of my family," he says. "I just wanted to be alive."

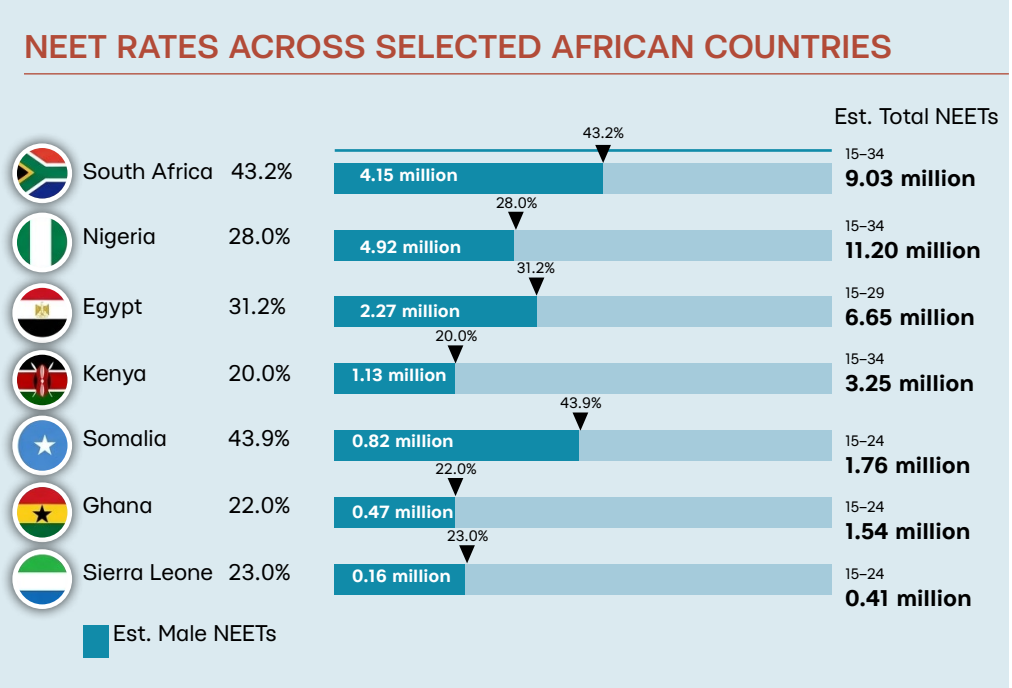
Back in Accra, Adjoa keeps sending messages to his phone, searching for answers. The JFJ investigation team interviews Kwabena in a Ukrainian prisoner-of-war camp on 24 October 2025 and informs her he is still alive. She continues messaging his number, hoping someone will let her hear his voice. In December, a reply finally comes. "I have your husband," it reads. "He is currently under investigation." Another one follows shortly afterwards. "He came to Ukraine to kill." Ukrainian authorities confirm that phones are routinely confiscated from captured combatants. Kwabena's device was in military custody.

Kwabena is now in a Ukrainian prisoner-of-war camp, awaiting possible repatriation. In Accra, Adjoa continues visiting Ghana's Foreign Ministry, asking when – or if – he might come home.

**Names changed to protect identity.*

13 million candidates

Across Africa, tens of millions of young people are classified as NEET: not in education, employment, or training. In just seven African countries whose nationals were interviewed by JFJ in Ukrainian POW camps, there are more than 13 million young men of fighting age who fall into this category.[53]



These figures help explain the vulnerability recruiters were able to exploit. But unemployment alone does not explain why African men end up in Russian trenches.

To understand why Russia's recruitment operation finds candidates, three additional factors matter: remittance economies that make overseas work a household strategy rather than a personal choice; wage differentials that make even dangerous offers appear worthwhile; and a migration infrastructure that already connects African job seekers to foreign opportunities, including fraudulent and exploitative ones.

The remittance imperative

The irony is that many Africans encouraged their loved ones to pursue recruitment opportunities because the job on offer was felt to be the opportunity of a lifetime. In South Africa, for example, the most prominent recruitment scandal involved the family of ex-President Jacob Zuma. His daughter, a member of Parliament, recruited eight of her own family members, apparently believing that they were to receive specialised military training in Russia for the benefit of her father's political party.[54] The men were saved before they were deployed to the frontline. Not so lucky were the groups of men in Kenya who were enlisted by older relatives who were either well connected or in the military. JFJ interviews establish remittances as a primary driving force supporting Russian recruitment of Africans.

For many African families, overseas employment is a household economic strategy. Remittances (money sent home by workers abroad) are a critical source of income across the continent and in some countries, they are the single largest source of foreign exchange. In Kenya, household remittances accounted for US$5

53 Population figures are calculated estimates based on the most recent gender-disaggregated rates from the World Bank at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.NEET.MA.ZS and Statistics South Africa at https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18398.
54 See Duduzile Zuma declares herself a victim in affidavit against alleged mercenary recruiter at https://iol.co.za/news/crime-and-courts/2025-11-25-duduzile-zuma-declares-herself-a-victim-in-affidavit-against-alleged-mercenary-recruiter/.

billion in annual revenue as of 2024, the largest foreign exchange earner for the country, contributing 4.2 per cent of GDP.[55] Since 2007, gross international remittance inflows into Africa have surpassed official development assistance levels and recently overtook foreign direct investment (FDI).[56]

The consequence is that migration is often not an individual act but a family and latterly a national investment. Households pool resources to send one member abroad in the expectation that his earnings will support those who remain behind. When recruitment agencies in Nairobi or Accra promise US$2,000 a month in Russia – a very large sum considering the US$100 to US$500 per month available at home – the pressure to accept comes not only from the man's own circumstances but from the family that depends on him. Most interviewees also reported verbal promises of Russian citizenship for the recruit and his nuclear and extended family upon completion of a one-year contract. The offer was presented as a path to family-level economic mobility, not simply individual employment.

What recruiters did not disclose was that international sanctions on Russian banks effectively blocked SWIFT transfers to many African countries, and also sanctioned crypto transactions.[57] Most recruits who travelled to Russia believing they would be able to send money home found that in reality they could not. Some were deployed so quickly that they never accessed their signing bonuses or first month's salary. Others could see wages deposited in Russian bank accounts but had no practical way to use or transfer the money. "My own money was there, but I couldn't touch it," one recruit told JFJ.[58] For many recruits, the remittance promise proved impossible to realise because they could not practically access or transfer their earnings after their arrival in Russia.

The migration infrastructure

Russia's recruitment operation did not build its pipeline from scratch. It exploited one that already existed. Across Africa, a well-established migration infrastructure connects job seekers with overseas employment through licensed agencies, informal brokers, personal networks, and digital platforms. This infrastructure has long served legitimate labour migration. It has also long been exploited by traffickers.

African economies exemplify the phenomenon of jobless growth, a structural disconnect where GDP rises but formal employment fails to keep pace. The continent's economies need to create roughly 15 million jobs each year to absorb the young people entering the labour market. At the current rate, they are around 12 million jobs short.[59] High internet penetration in urban areas and a global culture of social media have enabled this unemployed population to dream globally.[60] But the same platforms that give rise to new ambitions have long been used by traffickers posing as recruitment agencies promising jobs abroad. The digital infrastructure that connects a young man in Mogadishu to a Russian military recruitment advertisement is the same infrastructure that has, for years, connected Kenyan domestic workers to abusive employers in the Gulf and Nigerian workers to scam call centres in Southeast Asia.[61]

55 Central Bank of Kenya, Press Release: 2025 Remittances Household Survey, https://www.centralbank.go.ke/uploads/press_releases/391352851_Press%20Release%20-%202025%20Remittances%20Household%20Survey.pdf.

56 See Remittances to Africa 2024 at https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/10-financial-flows/#02-remittances-to-africa.

57 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/.

58 JFJ interview with a Kenyan recruit. The same observation is corroborated by JFJ interviews with Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean recruits regarding SWIFT-blocked transfers. This is the master recruit-testimony note on non-disclosure of financial-access barriers.

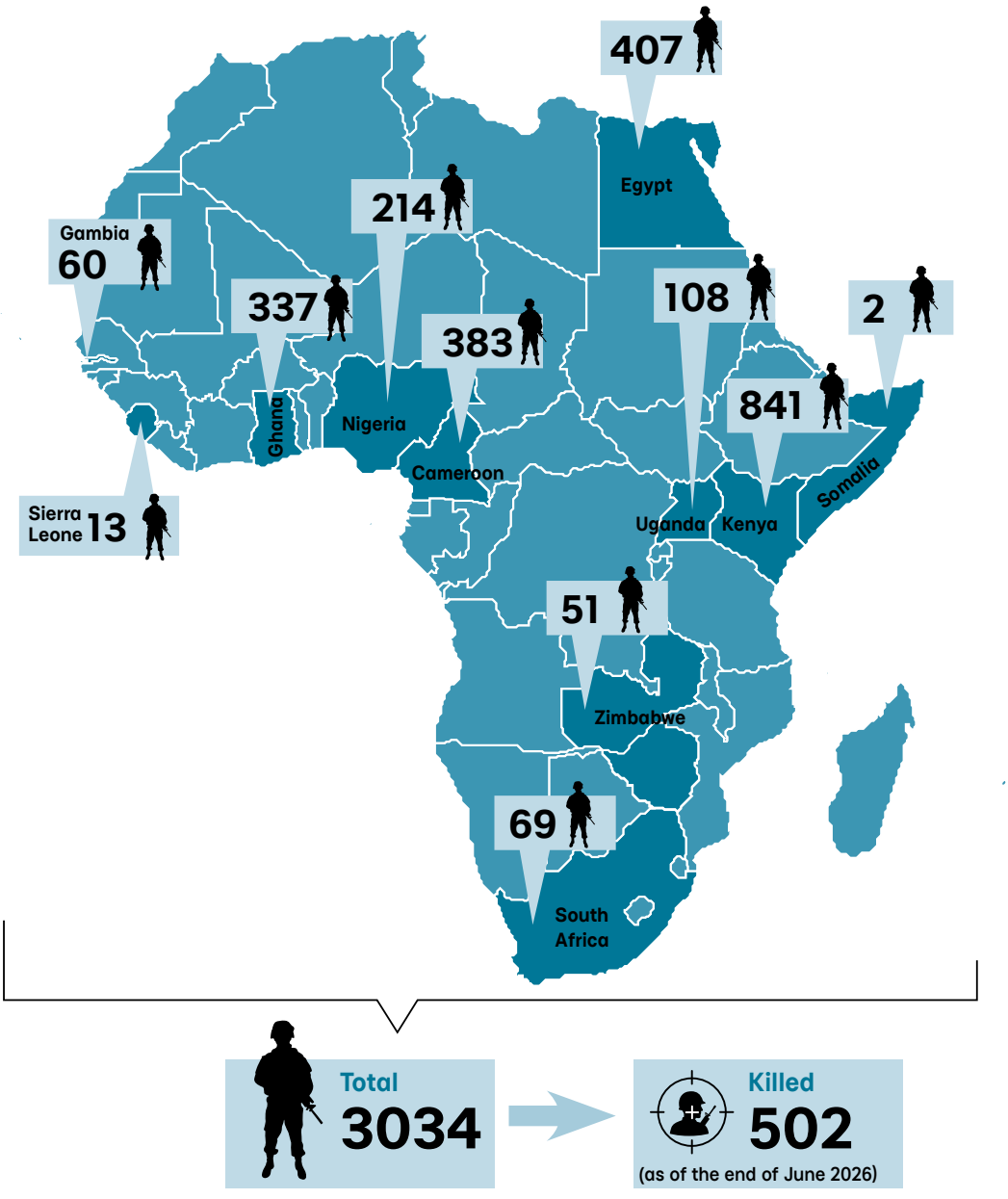
59 See Regional outlook for youth in the labour market – Sub Saharan Africa 2024 in Global Youth Employment Trends in Africa, International Labour Organization, August 2024 at page 2 https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Sub-Saharan%20Africa%20GET%20Youth%202024_0.pdf.

60 See for example "Africa's Youthquake - Decoding the continent's largest generation and its transformative impact", February 2026 which establishes exposure via mobile internet bridges the geographic gap between African youth and global consumerism. The report details a surge in the desire for high-end consumer tech, modern housing, and global luxury standards, driven entirely by seeing these "material comforts" normalised on global digital platforms. It is available online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/400936148_Africa's_Youthquake_Decoding_the_continent's_largest_generation_and_its_transformative_impact_2026.

61 On the exploitation of digital platforms by trafficking networks, see https://www.freedomcollaborative.org/forced-criminality-2026. On the exploitation of Kenyans in Southeast Asian scam call centres, see https://www.parliament.go.ke/index.php/node/25753.

In Kenya, the government itself accelerated this process. In 2023, the state established a labour export programme, Kazi Majuu (Work Overseas), within a new department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Department of Diaspora Affairs, with a target of one million foreign jobs annually, in the hope of more than doubling annual remittances, while reducing youth unemployment.[62] That programme's lax oversight created the institutional environment that recruitment agencies would later exploit. The details of how that infiltration occurred are the subject of the next chapter.

NUMBER OF AFRICAN RECRUITS PER COUNTRY



62 Government of Kenya / Ministry of Labour, 'Government secures 200,000 foreign jobs as Kenya aims for one million annually,' https://www.labour.go.ke/government-secures-200000-foreign-jobs-kenyans-aims-one-million-annually. See also 'Kenyan Workers Get Abused Abroad. The President's Family and Allies Profit,' New York Times, 14 November 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/14/world/europe/kenya-president-saudi-arabia-maids.html.



Some of the African recruits recruited into the Russian military.

It's economics, not ideology

Economic opportunity was the dominant factor in every case documented by JFJ. In none of the interviews conducted – with prisoners of war, serving recruits, returnees, escapees, or families – did ideology or political support for Russia emerge as a motivation for enlistment. The motivations were consistent across nationalities: wages, citizenship, family obligation, and the absence of alternatives at home.

This finding has direct implications for the legal and policy analysis in the later chapters of this report. If the men documented here had been ideological volunteers, the legal framework for addressing their situation would have been different. Instead, they are economic migrants who were either deceived into military service or were driven to it by conditions that left them with no choice.

The conditions described in this chapter created the supply. What remains to be explained is the machinery that connected them: how recruiters found candidates, how candidates were moved, and how the promise of civilian work became a military contract. That machinery is the subject of Part II.