Conclusion

The recruitment of African nationals into Russia's war in Ukraine is not a collection of unrelated national cases. It is a continental crisis processed through national channels: different brokers, different agencies, different visa routes, different cover stories, but the same destination and the same institutional end point. The men caught in it were treated by the system as interchangeable; only their names, passports, and families differed.

The legal question is, therefore, not whether individual recruits signed documents in Russia. Many did. The question is whether a signature obtained after deception, concealment of the true employer, untranslated military contracts, threats of criminal prosecution, passport confiscation, financial isolation, and deployment to the front can be treated as consent. It cannot. Where military service is procured through deception, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, or concealment of material terms, the law delivers protection before punishment.

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That principle matters because the positions adopted by Russia and by several African states fall at the same hurdle. Russia treats the matter as contractual. African governments have too often treated it as consular embarrassment, private misfortune, or unauthorised foreign enlistment. Both approaches avoid the central fact: men who left home in search of work were moved through a pipeline that turned economic vulnerability into military labour. The consequence is predictable: families searching for sons in silence while the wounded wait indefinitely, without support from their own government. Prisoners of war remain outside exchange lists and the bodies of the dead return late, or not at all.

Russia is the destination state and principal beneficiary of the operation, but African states have permitted recruitment networks to operate within their jurisdictions, through their labour migration systems, airports, agencies, and official blind spots. Recruiters and brokers have profited. Public officials were named and not held to account. And continental institutions remained silent while a continental problem crossed borders faster than any national response could contain it.

This report opened with Bibiana Wangari Waithaka, who learned of her son's death, not from an embassy, a ministry, a military authority, or a recruitment agency, but through social media. Her case is not an exception to the system documented here, but its starkest rendering: a mother sent daily messages into silence while the institutions that should have known, acted, and answered stood elsewhere.

Survivors and prisoners of war must be identified and repatriated. Families of the dead and missing must be informed, supported, and compensated. Recruiters, agencies, facilitators, and complicit officials must be prosecuted. The African Union must treat this as a continental crisis, not as a series of bilateral irritants between individual states and Moscow.

Until that happens, the market remains open. The routes may shift, the countries may change, the recruiters may rename themselves – but their logic will remain the same: African vulnerability converted into foreign military labour, and Africans spending their lives in a war they did not choose.