INTRODUCTION

Why this report?

Thousands of African men have been recruited into Russia's war with Ukraine through a system that disguised military service as civilian employment, moved men across borders on tourist visas, and bound them by contracts written in a language they could not read. By the time they understood what they had signed, they could not leave.

This report documents how that system works, who built it, what it does to the people inside it, and why the governments responsible for protecting them have so far failed to act. The investigation by Journalists For Justice (JFJ), a Hague-based media investigative team, has found that the recruitment operation exhibits multiple indicators of trafficking under international law[2] and relies extensively on deception, abuse of vulnerability, and financial and legal mechanisms that trap recruits in the system, leaving them with no realistic means of withdrawing once inside Russia. Evidence gathered by JFJ indicates that return is often only possible through escape, injury, intervention by embassies and national authorities, or repatriation of bodies after death.

> **Kenyans, as well as many citizens of other states who signed contracts to participate in the special military operation, did so on a voluntary basis... Contracts provide that as soon as the contract terminates, no repatriation is needed... this person is no longer bound by a contract and may do whatever they want. Moreover, but this should be done within the Ministry of Defence."**
>
> Musalia Mudavadi, Foreign Minister of Kenya, 16 March 2026

Whether or not recruits receive assistance from their governments often depends on the willingness and capacity of national authorities to intervene. In practice, several African governments have accepted the validity of the military service contracts signed by recruits with the Russian military. One Sudanese recruit who told JFJ he had been promised civilian employment but was instead recruited into Russia's armed forces reported that when he contacted his country's ambassador in Moscow seeking assistance, he was asked whether he had completed his contract. When he replied that he had not, he was told "go and complete your contract." Speaking at a press conference, Kenya's Foreign Affairs Minister Musalia Mudavadi[3] adopted more or less the same stance.[4] He accepted his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov's description of Africans serving in the Russian military as "volunteers – those who join the special military operation fully in line with Russian legislation." This exchange came months after Kenyan officials had publicly warned that citizens were being lured into the Russian military by what they described as "ruthless agents".

The month of March 2026 saw a flurry of events in which both Moscow and Kyiv responded to African concerns about the recruitment crisis. By May 2026, the Kenyan government reported that 53 Kenyan nationals had been repatriated from Russia.[5]

The JFJ investigation found that a Kenyan embassy official also assisted some Ugandan and Sudanese recruits who were unable to obtain support from their own diplomatic missions. In some Kenyan cases, politically connected individuals attempted to leverage their relationships with government officials and contacts in Moscow to secure the return of recruits from their home areas.[6] In South Africa, government

2 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (the "Palermo Protocol"), adopted 15 November 2000, entered into force 25 December 2003. Article 3(a) defines trafficking in persons.

3 His official title is Prime Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretary for Foreign and Diaspora Affairs. For brevity we have adopted the moniker Foreign Minister.

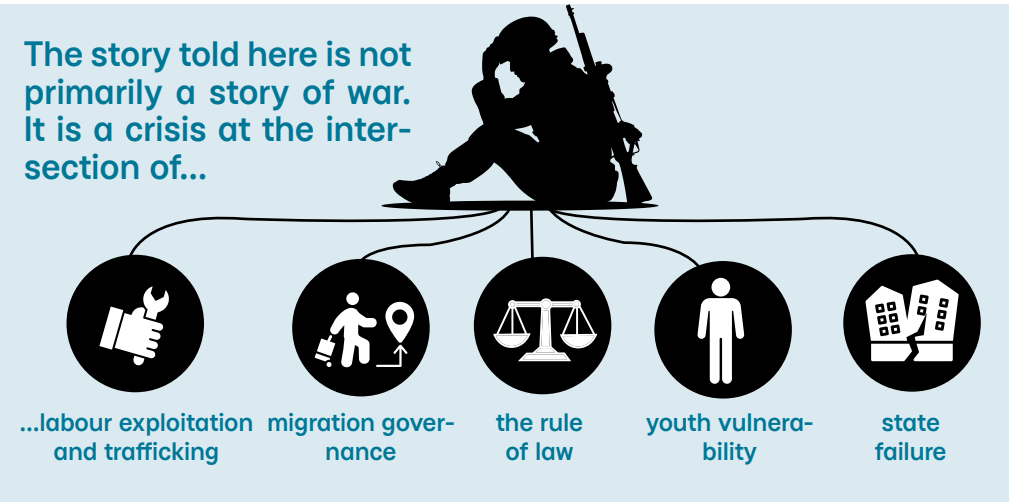
4 Moscow, 16 March 2026.

5 See Statement of the Prime Cabinet Secretary https://parliament.go.ke/.

6 A prominent example is the return of Leparakwo Saitei and Kelvin Lemashon Koriko, released from service in the Russian military immediately after Mudavadi-Lavrov 16 March 2026 meeting in Moscow. Mudavadi was accompanied to Russia by Julius Sunkuli, a prominent Kenyan politician and diplomat who currently represents the constituency from which the two returnees hail.

intervention was required to facilitate the return of 17 recruits from Russia in February 2026,[7] while Ghana announced an agreement[8] with Ukraine for the invocation of the Geneva Conventions. Zimbabwean authorities stated they had processed and cleared the paperwork to repatriate the remains of four citizens killed while serving with Russian forces.[9] Regardless of these announcements, no African has been released from Ukrainian custody or repatriated by Ukraine to their country of nationality.

The story told here is not primarily a story of war. It is a crisis at the intersection of labour exploitation and human trafficking, migration governance and the rule of law, youth vulnerability and state failure. The men at the centre of this report were not ideologues or adventurers. In none of the interviews conducted by JFJ did ideology or political support for Russia emerge as a motivation for enlisting.[10] These were job seekers who entered a recruitment pipeline expecting work but found themselves as infantry on the frontline of one of the world's first AI wars, where they face devastating swarm drones that can find and destroy targets with unprecedented accuracy.[11]



Ukrainian military data records reviewed by JFJ, combined with additional cases identified through interviews and independent reporting, identify at least 3,034 African nationals from 40 countries enlisted in Russia's armed forces since October 2022. Interim data establishes the names and details of 502 dead African nationals from 29 countries, meaning the fate of over 2,500 other Africans is unconfirmed at the date of this publication. 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.

The report first examines the drivers of demand for foreign recruits and vulnerability among African populations. It then traces the recruitment system itself, the experiences of those drawn into it, its spread across the continent, and the failures of national and international institutions to respond. It concludes with a legal analysis, formal findings, and recommendations.

The evidence in this report establishes that the recruitment of Africans into Russia's war is not a bilateral matter between individual African states and Russia. It is a continental crisis requiring a continental response. This report seeks to provide the factual and legal foundation for that response.

7 https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/president-ramaphosa-welcomes-return-south-african-men-russian-frontlines.
8 https://www.graphic.com.gh/international/international-news/ghanaian-fighters-captured-in-ukraine-countries-pledge-cooperation-under-geneva-conventions.html.
9 Statement of the Zimbabwe Government spokesperson Nick Mangwana https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/5/14/zimbabweans-lured-into-russias-war-as-families-plead-for-their-return.
10 Based on JFJ interviews conducted with prisoners of war, serving recruits, returnees, escapees, and the families of recruits from Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, Egypt, Somalia, Nigeria, and Cameroon.
11 The ethics and legality of weaponised AI raises novel moral questions and the scholarship is nascent. At present drones are remotely controlled by pilots under a responsible commander subject to the laws of war, but "autonomy is on the imminent horizon". See Linn, Thomas C. (2026) "Research & Debate–The First AI War," Naval War College Review: Vol. 79: No. 2, Article 9. Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol79/iss2/9.