Russia: Trafficking of Foreign Nationals to Fight in Ukraine

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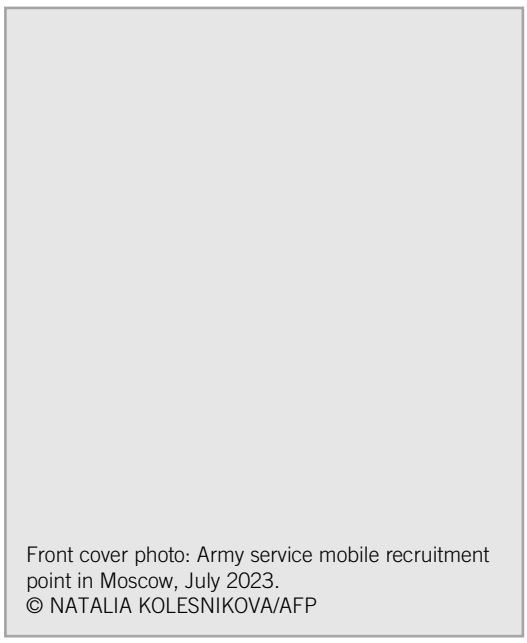

Front cover photo: Army service mobile recruitment point in Moscow, July 2023.
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Russia has recruited thousands of foreign nationals from low-income countries, as well as migrants and refugees already living in Russia, to fight in its war in Ukraine. Recruitment has frequently involved deceptive, coercive and exploitative practices. Many recruits were lured by false promises of civilian employment, high salaries, legal status or Russian citizenship, and promptly found themselves on the front line in Ukraine. Testimonies from prisoners of war and others describe contracts signed without informed consent, confiscation of passports, restrictions on freedom of movement, inadequate training and threats against those seeking to leave military service - practices that may amount to human trafficking. They must end immediately, and those responsible must be held accountable.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been characterized by widespread civilian harm, destruction of infrastructure, and serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, extensively documented by Amnesty International and others. However, the cruel impact of this war has extended further, beyond the territory of Ukraine, affecting disadvantaged communities and vulnerable individuals globally.

It has been widely reported that Russia has increasingly relied on the recruitment of foreign nationals, particularly from global south low-income countries, as combatants to support its war effort in Ukraine.[1] Amnesty International's research into this issue demonstrates that this has been done through practices that are often deceptive or coercive, and invariably exploitative. These practices build on pre-existing migration pathways and the abusive practices towards migrants in Russia,[2] and have evolved since February 2022 into a system that, in many cases, results in individuals being drawn into active participation in hostilities under conditions which, in themselves, raise serious human rights concerns. The level of exploitation and coercion involved, which has come to Amnesty International's attention in the course of its ongoing research, leads to the conclusion that the reported practices connected to the recruitment of foreign nationals to fight for Russian forces in many cases amount to the crime of trafficking in persons.

These practices must end immediately. There must be full accountability, for all those directly involved and all those complicit in the abusive practices, whether as private recruiters or intermediaries, state officials or military commanders, and full and effective reparations provided to all individuals or their families who have suffered human rights violations as a result. Where the crime of trafficking in persons has occurred, their status as victims should be considered, including those held by Ukraine as prisoners of war.

[1] Truth Hounds, International Federation for Human Rights, "Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking? Russia's Exploitation of Foreign Fighters in Its War Against Ukraine", 29 April 2026, https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/20260424_fidh_rapport-ukraine_en_web.pdf; Fortify Rights, Truth Hounds, "I was tricked into the war", 3 March 2026, https://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/I%20Was%20Tricked%20into%20the%20War%20-%20Fortify%20Rights%20and%20Truth%20Hounds%20Report.pdf

[2] Human Rights Watch, Living in Fear and Humiliation: Rising Xenophobic Harassment and Violence towards Central Asian Migrants in Russia, 17 March 2025; UN OHCHR, Russia must act to end long-standing trafficking for labour exploitation of migrant women: UN experts, 28 July 2025

METHODOLOGY

Research into this subject was prompted by conversations with prisoners of war (POWs) held by Ukraine, during which nearly all third-country nationals complained about the abusive recruitment practices that brought them into the Russian military forces and to the front line. Amnesty International has pursued further research into this subject, including the collection of information and evidence from other sources described below; and its representatives have repeatedly visited POW camps in Ukraine since October 2024, with requisite permission from Ukrainian authorities. Amnesty International also submitted a similar request to the Russian authorities which has not been answered.

Meanwhile, in May 2025, the Russian authorities designated Amnesty International an "undesirable organization" whereby they formally outlawed the organization's presence in Russia, criminalized its activities in-country, and denied it the opportunity to openly collect information in, or receive information from, Russia. This has prevented Amnesty International from at this time freely pursuing similar lines of enquiry about, or collating and collaborating similar allegations against, the Ukrainian side, with particular regard to the corroboration of stories of individuals who allege abuse, the details of which were originally presented in Russian government-controlled media and reproduced elsewhere.[3]

Amnesty International has been approached by individuals directly affected, members of their families or other representatives, including lawyers, human rights activists and journalists, with information and requests about individual cases of persons coercively recruited or conscripted into the Russian forces, or at risk of coercive recruitment. In addition to POWs captured by Ukrainian forces, these include individuals currently serving with Russian forces at the front line or believed to be at the front line in Ukraine, and third-country nationals in Russia vulnerable to such recruitment practises. Typically, according to the testimonies collected by Amnesty International, these are individuals who found themselves at the front line in Ukraine due to coercive, deceptive and exploitative recruitment practices. Where possible, this has been reflected in the research, but details have been anonymised (in some instances by changing the names) to ensure that no harm is caused to the persons in situations of vulnerability.

According to official data shared with Ukrainian media by the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters[4] (the inter-departmental agency responsible for coordinating all matters relating to POWs on both sides), as of April 2026 at least 28,391 foreign nationals from 136 countries had been identified as having taken part in the hostilities as members of the Russian Armed Forces, in addition to the regular North Korean forces which joined the Russian forces at the front line at the end of 2024. Amnesty International cannot independently corroborate these figures and the scale of the issue.

As part of its ongoing research, Amnesty International conducted a total of six visits to two POW camps in western Ukraine between 2024 and 2026. During these visits, its representatives carried out interviews with dozens of POWs, among them 15 captured third-country nationals from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Somalia and South Africa. Among the interviewed POWs who are third country nationals, only three stated that they had knowingly signed a military contract and understood that they would be deployed to the war zone. Seven others claimed they had been promised civilian jobs, and a further six provided details of their recruitment experience which negate its voluntary nature (details below).

Amnesty International's research teams working on Ukraine and Russia have also received, requested, and collated information on Russian recruitment practices, individual cases and relevant circumstances from other Amnesty International country teams outside of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Amnesty

[3] For instance, the interview of William Gallego Orozco, described as a "Colombian mercenary recruited by Ukraine," apparently originally published by the Russian state-controlled media network RT, has been cited in multiple subsequent media reports by RT and media in South America, for instance: RT en Español, "Con mentiras': Mercenario colombiano relata cómo Ucrania recluta extranjeros para la guerra", 2 June 2026, https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/608048-mentiras-mercenario-colombiano-ucrania; Jimmy Nomesqui Rivera, "Mercenario colombiano capturado por Rusia logró comunicarse con su familia: 'Ya aprendí la lección'", Infobae, 3 June 2026, https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2026/06/03/mercenario-colombiano-capturado-por-rusia-logro-comunicarse-con-su-familia-ya-aprendi-la-leccion/ and other media internationally.

[4] Interfax Україна, Україні відомо про 28391 іноземця із 136 країни світу в армії РФ – Координаційний штаб, 29 April 2026, https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1163391.html

International national Sections. They have also written to national authorities in a number of countries for further details. The findings of this research are further supported by open-source information and interviews with members of Ukrainian and other national authorities, and other key informants. For example, an African government contacted confirmed its "deep concern about the predatory recruitment practices of certain recruitment agencies targeting [the country's citizens] [...] which include false promises of legitimate employment [in Russia] and the exploitation of economic vulnerability" and involve "deceptive elements". The same government has worked on the cases of several individuals "lured into the conflict zone", and in a number of cases ensured their safe return, but emphasized the need for discretion in this matter.[5]

In a further example, a group of lawyers from Peru informed Amnesty International that they are currently assisting 200 families whose loved ones travelled to Russia under false promises of civilian employment, and estimate that there are at least 300 more such individual cases from Peru. They also shared that the Peruvian embassy in Moscow had secured the return home of at least 10 former recruits.[6] Numerous media publications, and research by other human rights monitors,[7] corroborate such allegations.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, many conversations with key informants have been held by Amnesty International on a confidential basis.

At the time of writing, neither the International Secretariat of Amnesty International, nor Amnesty International Ukraine (Kyiv) has received individual communications from third-country nationals serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, their representatives or their families, which allege violations amounting to the crime of human trafficking. Amnesty International has reached out to third-country nationals serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the time of writing, some of whom have shared concerns. These concerns include repeated allegations of administrative violations and allegedly corrupt practices affecting their rights, privileges and conditions of service, as well as allegations, in at least one case, of practices that may amount to discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race or country of origin, and to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of third-country nationals by their superior in a particular military unit, also a third-country national. While these allegations did not suggest widespread practice, and none of them rendered allegations comparable to human trafficking or other egregious human rights violations documented in this publication, Amnesty International is pursuing this latter line of enquiry and has approached the Ukrainian authorities for comments. In their reply to the findings of this research, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine has said that they are aware of similar allegations and that they are being investigated, and that their root causes are being addressed.

[5] The respective government's response, in correspondence with Amnesty International, in a letter dated 15 May 2026.
[6] Online interview with Amnesty International, 24 June 2026.
See also La República, “Abogado revela que ocho peruanos habrían fallecido en zona de guerra en Rusia: ‘Les prometieron trabajos civiles’”, 29 April 2026, https://larepublica.pe/sociedad/2026/04/29/abogado-revela-que-ocho-peruanos-habrian-fallecido-en-zona-de-guerra-en-rusia-les-prometieron-trabajos-civiles-675729#google_vignette.
[7] Truth Hounds, International Federation for Human Rights, “Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking? Russia’s Exploitation of Foreign Fighters in Its War Against Ukraine”, 29 April 2026, https://truth-hounds.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/20260424_fidh_rapport-ukraine_en_web.pdf; Fortify Rights, Truth Hounds, “I was tricked into the war”, 3 March 2026, https://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/I%20Was%20Tricked%20into%20the%20War%20-%20Fortify%20Rights%20and%20Truth%20Hounds%20Report.pdf

1. EXPLOTATIVE RECRUITMENT PATHWAYS: OUTSIDE RUSSIA

The cases documented by Amnesty International follow two broad pathways through which foreign nationals are coerced and deceived into participation in hostilities.

The first involves recruitment of foreign nationals by approaching them outside Russia, in their home countries. This pathway, according to the individuals whose cases the organization has documented involves express deceit and misrepresentation. Many end up travelling to Russia under false promises, only to be fraudulently drawn into the military forces upon arrival. Amnesty International Interviewed individuals from Brazil, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa and Sri Lanka who had been recruited from outside Russia and, described being falsely promised civilian jobs, in security, logistics, construction, IT and other sectors, often with assurances of high salaries and expedited access to Russian citizenship.

"Nalin",[8] a Sri Lankan POW interviewed by Amnesty International in a prisoner camp in Ukraine in March 2026, said that "a friend" in Sri Lanka introduced him to "an [employment] agent who was Sri Lankan." According to Nalin, he was promised a civilian job as a security guard. The agent arranged his trip to Russia. Nalin said that another 58 Sri Lankans travelled with him to Moscow. They were met at the airport and driven to another location. The trip was not too long so he assumed it was still within Moscow area. There, he was presented with a document in Russian, with no translation offered, and hastened into signing it on the spot. None of the people who met him at the airport or accompanied him during the transfer spoke English, let alone his native Sinhala. He claimed he was confused and had no understanding about what was happening. Apparently, amongst the papers he and other newly arrived Sri Lankans signed, was a military contract, on the basis of which he was promptly deployed to the front line, following fairly rudimentary training (also conducted in Russian).

Two other testimonies received by Amnesty International during the visit to the prisoner camp in March 2026 tell a very similar story. "Lahiru" and "Saman", two Sri Lankans, recounted that they had arrived in Russia after having been promised highly paid civilian jobs, and were tricked into signing what turned out to be military contracts with the Russian Armed Forces, and sent to front line. Neither Lahiru nor Saman received any money, according to them.

As the documents were in a language which they did not understand, it is unclear what they included apart from the military contract. According to a media report by *The Insider*, based on journalistic investigations, there have been cases of foreign military recruits coerced to sign a power of attorney in the presence of a notary, affording the right to others to access, and make transfers, from their bank accounts. This, according to the journalists, resulted in the recruits not receiving any payments.[9] Amnesty International has received similar allegations from a group of lawyers from Peru. According to them, there have been cases of individuals signing documents which granted powers of attorney, including general powers of attorney, to third parties for periods of five and 10 years, and in some cases indefinitely.[10]

While local agents appear to have been instrumental outside Russia in targeting potential recruits into Russian military forces, in some cases such individuals were recruited online, including through misleading job advertisements, by recruiters whose location is concealed or unknown, and even the country of destination for potential employment deliberately misrepresented or obfuscated.

Amnesty International spoke with the wife of "Joseph", a truck driver from South Africa, who applied online for a driving job in Poland in late 2025. His application was successful, and a female agent who introduced herself as Anzhelina began communicating with him on WhatsApp, about the details of his future employment and travel arrangements. The wife told Amnesty International that they were taken by surprise by the fact that despite the job supposedly being in Poland, his travel was arranged to Moscow, Russia. The agent explained that he would pick up a truck in Moscow and drive it to Poland, saying that Poland and Russia were neighbouring countries. The agent provided detailed instructions on the border checks at

[8] In person interview with Amnesty International, 26 March 2026
[9] The Insider, «Воспользовались нашим незнанием русского»: как два тиктокера заработали миллионы, воруя деньги у завербованных ими бразильцев., 12 June 2026
[10] Online interview with Amnesty International, 24 June 2026

the airport, and even specified which gate to go to as "there will be a person to support you." Joseph was also told that there would be another South African travelling with him. He met the other South African man at the airport. After they boarded the flight to Moscow in December 2025, the agent stopped all the communication with either of them. "Upon arrival to Moscow, everything was taken from him. There were times when I did not talk to him for two months. He was told that he would not be going to Poland and that he is becoming a soldier." According to Joseph's wife, he did not have any military experience prior to going to Russia and was not given much training there. "They promised he would get paid, in the army, but he never got any money at all."

The overwhelming majority of third-country nationals interviewed for this research, from among those recruited into the Russian forces in their home country, claimed that they were lied to or deliberately mislead. In all of their cases, and across this and the other pathway described below, economic vulnerability was key. Many of those interviewed described having little or no income prior to travelling to Russia, being economically vulnerable in Russia and having limited economic prospects in their home country.

"Ahmed",[11] from Somalia, stated in a March 2025 interview with Amnesty International in a POW camp in Ukraine, that he had "no job, no income, no future" in Somalia, and that he "needed to leave at any cost and would have gone anywhere." His plan was to obtain Russian citizenship and stay in Russia. He joined the Russian Armed Forces despite having no military background and having very little understanding of the reality on the ground at the front line. After he joined, he said he was provided with "almost no proper training" and, at some point, he "found himself near the front line without even having a weapon." Ahmed cannot communicate with his parents as phone or video calls are not allowed at the prisoner camp, and he can only send letters, but his parents cannot read or write, so they do not know whether their son is alive.

Information shared with Amnesty International by various key informants corroborated allegations of deceit at the initial stage of recruitment. For instance, the Peruvian lawyers interviewed by the organization reported that, from 2025 onwards, recruiters have increasingly used deceptive techniques. Typically working via Colombia-based agencies and targeting Peruvian nationals, the recruiters earned approximately US$2,000 for each new recruit. According to the lawyers' information, the recruits were provided with plane tickets to Russia in a matter of days. Upon arrival, the Peruvian recruits signed military contracts and powers of attorney, for periods of five to 15 years or without end date. In one case, two men from the same family, a father and a son, were promised civilian jobs in Russia. The father travelled first and soon contacted the son warning him of the deceit and urging him not to go. By then, the son had already reached Russia but received the message from his father and promptly sought assistance from the Peruvian embassy in Moscow, which provided him shelter. The recruiters visited the embassy, insisting that they wished to see him. He was then transferred to a discreet accommodation; the recruiters later found him there but he refused to cooperate and afterwards managed to travel back to Peru.

In many cases reported to Amnesty International, promises of high salaries and sign-up bonuses were not fulfilled. While some individuals received some payments before capture, many reported receiving nothing at all. Whether misled about the nature of their job in Russia or not, the recruits were often fraudulently promised quick enrichment.

2. EXPLOITATIVE RECRUITMENT PATHWAYS: IN RUSSIA

The second pathway of recruitment of foreign nationals into Russian forces targets migrants and refugees already present in Russia, often in situations of vulnerability due to precarity of their immigration status and economic situation. Several of those whose cases Amnesty International has examined, described facing difficulties relating to their immigration status in Russia (typically, their residence permit expiring), financial precarity or harassment by law enforcement agencies. Individuals concerned reported being approached by Russian interlocutors or intermediaries—often described vaguely as "acquaintances"—or actively informed by migration officials of this option, and offered a seemingly easy and effective remedy, i.e., to

[11] In person interview with Amnesty International, 30 July 2025

sign a military contract, or face penalties, including detention and deportation. By that point, they would have heavily invested, financially and otherwise, into the prospect of earning a better living in Russia than in their home country and not yet recovered their losses. The cost of visa and travel to Russia, recruitment agents' and other intermediaries' fees and other related expenses, and the threat of a hefty fine for overstaying their Russian visa followed by deportation, meant they were particularly vulnerable to abusive recruitment practises. In such cases, the financial and legal vulnerability, combined with coercive and deceitful practises employed, undermines the seemingly 'voluntary' nature of their consent to sign a military contract.

"Nuwan"[12] from Sri Lanka, interviewed by Amnesty International in a POW camp in Ukraine in March 2026, arrived in Russia in 2024 on a work visa. He said he was employed by the fast-food chain Burger King, in the kitchen. Six months after his visa expired, he could not afford to travel back home to renew it, and so he stayed on in Russia with an irregular migration status, until the police stopped him and, after checking his documents, issued him a fine for irregular stay in Russia. Soon after he was approached by "a friend from India" who told him of the possibility to sign a contract to join the Russian army. Nuwan said he had been promised a sizeable one-off payment as sign-on bonus and a sizeable monthly salary, but also a residency permit and a fast-track pathway to Russian citizenship. After two weeks of military training at a facility called Avangard,[13] he was sent to the front line in eastern Ukraine, where he was taken prisoner by the Ukrainian forces after less than a month. He had been in the camp for more than a year by the time of the interview. Having received no further earnings, and no assistance of any kind from the Sri Lankan government, he told Amnesty International that he could not "simply return home," as he needed money to support his family and his return home.

His story is not unique. "Dinesh",[14] who is also a Sri Lankan prisoner in the same camp as Nuwan, told Amnesty International that he was also "approached by a friend" shortly after his work visa had expired, was promised that it would be renewed and that he would receive a Russian passport if he signed a contract with the Russian army. After two weeks' training in the Avangard centre, Dinesh was sent to the front line. He received his sign-on bonus of 135,000 roubles (between US$1,500-2,000, depending on the exchange rate at the time), and also received the salary of 250,000 roubles (between US$2,950 to US$2,965, depending on the exchange rate at the time) for two months, after which he was captured.

"Ruben",[15] a national of Cuba, in an interview with Amnesty International in June 2026 in the same POW camp in Ukraine, recounted that he had arrived in Moscow in 2021, with his wife. He explained that Cubans do not require a visa to travel to Russia, and that it is very common for Cubans to go to Russia to work. His wife found a job at a hotel, and he found work in construction. After approximately a year in Russia, Ruben was arrested for drug possession and sentenced to six years in prison. He was facing deportation to Cuba after serving his sentence. In 2025, he and other foreign prisoners were offered an opportunity to sign military contracts instead of serving the remainders of their sentences, with a prospect of settlement in Russia. They were promised a Russian passport, 800,000 roubles (approximately US$ 10,000) sign-on bonus, and a monthly salary of 400,000 roubles (approximately US$ 5,000). "I signed the contract because I did not want to be deported back to Cuba. There were four of us from Cuba who agreed to sign the contract." Ruben also shared that previously only imprisoned Russians had been offered the opportunity to join the military forces in exchange for a pardon. He appeared very distressed when talking about the prospect of going back to Cuba, pointing out that "going to war" had seemed a better option for him. He had hopes of obtaining Russian citizenship after serving, and also of helping his wife to get

[12] In person interview with Amnesty International, 26 March 2026
[13] This was likely the "Avangard Educational & Methodological Center", a joint initiative of the authorities of the Moscow City and Moscow Region, and the Russian Ministry of Defence, which claims to be tasked with providing military and "patriotic" training to tens of thousands of recruits a year. Some details are available on the Centre's official website, https://avangard.center.
[14] In person interview with Amnesty International, 26 March 2026
[15] In person interview with Amnesty International, 25 June 2026

citizenship, and after that bringing his children to Russia (their children are currently in Cuba with his mother).

Two weeks later, after signing "a lot of papers in Russian," Ruben and others were issued with military IDs and military tags and taken to a "polygon" (the Russian word used for "military training ground"). There were other former prisoners there, of different nationalities. Ruben specifically mentioned nationals of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan.

Ruben was deployed to the front line at the end of 2025. He was wounded and hospitalized twice before his capture in January 2026. Ruben said that he was receiving his salary prior to his capture, and that he would like to go back to his civilian life, with his wife, in Russia.

Two Egyptian citizens interviewed in the prisoner camp[16] had been students in Russia when they were detained for minor drug-related offences. They were threatened with a lengthy prison term and, as an alternative, offered to serve in the Russian Armed Forces. They stated that the offer was conveyed by an "official" who had access to those in police custody. One of these Egyptians stated that he had not realized what joining the Armed Forces would entail, but "quickly realized [once he faced] the reality — actual war, serious risk."

The instrumentalization of irregular status of foreign nationals who overstayed work-related visas, and of the precarious situation of legal offenders in Russia for military recruitment, as in the examples above, is not the only situation of vulnerability of foreign nationals exploited by recruiters to enlist them to join the Russian military forces. Refugees are equally exposed to predatory recruitment.

"Daniel", a national of a Central African country, had escaped persecution in his home country and received temporary protection in Russia in 2023, which was extended by a year in 2024. However, further extension was refused, which he claims was because of his refusal to sign a contract with Russian Armed Forces. He appealed this decision, unsuccessfully, and was arrested in the courtroom at the end of the appeal hearing, for violating Russian legislation covering foreign nationals. His final appeal is pending at the time of writing. In his communication with Amnesty International, after over a month in detention, he stated that he and other refugees, particularly Africans, were pressured into military service as a condition for "legalizing" their further stay in Russia. He believed he would be subjected to detention and possible deportation because of his refusal. A month later, in a message to Amnesty International, he wrote that some military personnel had visited the detention centre on that day and asked him and his fellow detainees whether they were willing to sign military contracts. At that point, according to him, after 70 days of detention he had no information on the progress of his final appeal and no understanding with regards to his immigration status and his rights in Russia.

Amnesty International reached out to a legal specialist who supports refugees and migrants in one of Russia's regions, and who is familiar with the specific circumstances concerning this refugee. The legal specialist confirmed that the fast-track opportunity to obtain Russian citizenship on condition of joining the Russian Armed Forces has been offered to foreign nationals in these circumstances, but insisted that no coercion was involved.

However, importantly, the legal specialist stated that in their practice, all migrants and refugees are asked at the Migration Department to sign a written acknowledgement (*raspiska*) that they are informed that they can regularize their stay and be granted Russian citizenship by signing a military contract.

While not a legally binding document in itself, nor produced by the military authorities (the potential contractor), this is a procedure involving migrants or refugees and a uniformed agency (a directorate of the Ministry of the Interior) which has the authority to arrest them, place them in a so-called temporary holding centre for foreign nationals (effectively an immigration detention centre, where they may be held for up to

[16] In person interview with Amnesty International, 30 July 2025

90 days, or much longer subject to judicial approval),[17] and to deport them from Russia. This signing of a paper in the presence of Ministry of the Interior officials is an intimidating procedure in itself, and takes place in a context in which the only immediate alternative to signing a miliary contract appears to be detention and/or forcible removal from Russia. For refugees, in particular, forcible removal represents a real risk of serious human rights violations upon return to their country of origin, and is therefore not a viable alternative. In this case, the coercive nature of the procedure is particularly striking. Even if express coercion may not have been applied in all the cases documented by Amnesty International, it is clear that refugees' and migrants' vulnerability is being routinely exploited by the Russian authorities in their drive to enlist third-country nationals into their military forces for the purpose of exploitation.

3. EXPLOITATION THROUGH DECEPTION

Across all testimonies, several additional patterns emerge about the manner in which people were deceived into exploitation.

3.1 NATURE OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Withholding or distorting information on the risks involved and on the specific nature or responsibilities of the job (specifically combat versus non-combat), and reliance on the lack of full understanding of the consequences by those concerned, are some of the ways people are lured into exploitation. The prospect of military service is typically presented as a non-combat support function, such as working in the military kitchen or as a driver far away from the front line.

Three Sri Lankans interviewed by Amnesty International at the POW camp who were in Russia prior to joining the Russian Armed Forces had believed that after signing the contract they would be performing the same job they did before, that is, cooking. None, according to their testimonies, had expected to be deployed to the active front line marked by intensive combat. One of them told Amnesty International: "The scale of fighting is unimaginable. You do not see Ukrainian soldiers, only drones. Drones everywhere. I would never go back there."

"Enrique"[18] from Cuba, who, despite the fact that he had knowingly signed a military contract, explained that he had had very different expectations due to what he "was told." He had obtained a job in construction in Russia, for which he had applied online: "It is very easy and common to travel to Russia for Cubans. There are so many opportunities there. [...] I loved it in Russia and wanted to live there. So, when a colleague offered me to sign a contract with the Russian Armed Forces to then get a Russian passport, I agreed."

Enrique travelled to Chelyabinsk where he was picked up at the airport and presented with a contract in Russian. He was allowed to translate it using his phone, and then he signed it, on 1 August 2025. Enrique received around 20 days of training "on a polygon somewhere in Luhansk" (a city in eastern Ukraine, occupied by Russia). After the training, he and some others travelled four hours by bus to a location closer to the front line, on 28 August 2025. He spent a few days there prior to being sent to the combat zone in what he called an armoured vehicle. "The vehicle was attacked by drones almost straight away. We all started running away in different directions. I do not know what happened to the others." Enrique was

[17] There are multiple such centres across Russia, and while conditions in them appear to vary, in some instances they are similar to prison conditions and may amount to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, according to credible reports. See for instance Новая газета Европа, «Условия содержания хуже, чем в тюрьме». Как выглядит жизнь в российских центрах временного содержания, где украинцы застревают на месяцы?, 13 October 2025, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/10/13/usloviia-soderzhaniia-khuzhe-chem-v-tiurme.
At the same time the issue of lengthy, in some instances effectively indefinite detention of individuals who are not accused of any criminal offences, is officially acknowledged, eg by the Human Rights Commissioner of St Petersburg: Уполномоченный по правам человека в Санкт-Петербурге, ЦВСИГ: куда приводит гражданская безответственность, 15 August 2025, https://upchspb.ru/news/tsvsig-kuda-privodit-grazhdanskaya-bezotvetstvennost/

[18] In person interview with Amnesty International, 25 June 2026

captured by Ukraine on 1 September 2026. At the end of his interview, Enrique explained that this was not what he had expected: “They told me I will be in a support function, not that I will go to the front.”

While some interviewees understood that they were signing contracts with the Russian Armed Forces, their accounts consistently indicate that critical information about the nature of the service, the likelihood of deployment to active combat, and the risks involved was withheld, obscured, or misrepresented. Many were migrants from countries facing serious economic challenges, instability, or widespread human rights violations, factors that had increased their vulnerability. In these circumstances, the issue is the extent to which deception, misinformation, and the exploitation of vulnerability undermined the possibility of fully informed and genuinely voluntary consent.

3.2 SUPPRESSION OF INFORMATION

A striking feature shared by many interviewees, including those recruited in Russia, is the extent to which they did not, by their own admission, understand the nature or the scale of the conflict they were being sent to, including the intensity of the fighting and therefore the risks involved prior to their deployment. This is largely due to the suppression of any independent and critical information about the war by the Russian authorities, as part of their brutal crackdown on free speech and all dissent.[19] Under legislation adopted, and updated, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (the so-called war censorship legislation), any critical statement about the war, or sharing information about alleged war crimes, is regarded as a legal offence in Russia, punishable by severe penalties including lengthy imprisonment.[20] Public discussion of Russia's military casualties, ill-treatment of members of Russian forces by their superiors and other problems in the army is similarly suppressed by means of administrative or criminal penalties or designation as "foreign agents." At the same time, the official narrative has been that Russia is not at war, and that the scale of its military engagement in Ukraine is limited in scope and successful. The term “war” is effectively prohibited, in favour of the official term “special military operation in Ukraine.” With the media effectively controlled by the government, and official narratives about the war subjected to misinformation and disinformation and imposed via an extensive system of indoctrination and propaganda,[21] it is not surprising that the true nature, scale and course of events at the front line in Ukraine may be unfamiliar to a consumer of the Russian media.

This lack of understanding of the risks involved implies not only a lack of genuine and informed consent from the individuals concerned, but the environment of deception that contributed to these coercive recruitment process.

3.3 PROMISE OF A RUSSIAN PASSPORT

All third country nationals interviewed by Amnesty International in the POW camps where foreigners are held, described Russian citizenship as a particular incentive, beyond promised monetary remuneration. Many appeared convinced that the Russian passport would provide employment opportunities in Europe or North America.

This belief appears to have been a significant factor that induced individuals in situations of legal precarity and economic vulnerability by reinforcing the perceived benefits of a civilian job or military enlistment in Russia. In this context, promises of citizenship were not only understood by many as a prospect to live in Russia but also as a pathway to broader economic and other opportunities. These expectations, whether

[19] Amnesty International, Russia: 20,000 activists subject to heavy reprisals as Russia continues to crack down on anti-war movement at home, 20 July 2023; Amnesty International, Russia: Surge in abuse of anti-terrorism laws to suppress dissent., 19 February 2024

[20] Amnesty International, Russian Federation: Further information: Russia, Release Aleksei Gorinov! , 20 November 2024

[21] For details and analysis of the system of indoctrination in Russian school education, see Amnesty International, Russia: Schools have turned into “factories of compliance” through state indoctrination and surveillance of children., 1 June 2026

already held and exploited by recruiters and other intermediaries or actively promoted by the recruiters, have contributed to a situation of many individuals finding themselves in a situation of exploitation.

4. TREATMENT AND CONDITIONS OF RECRUITS

Several other threads emerged across the testimonies about the mistreatment of those who were recruited.

4.1 LACK OF TRAINING

Pre-deployment training periods were consistently described as extremely short—typically around two weeks—after which individuals were deployed to active combat zones. Many reported insufficient preparation, lack of equipment, and limited communication with commanders due to language barriers. The minimal military training offered prior to deployment to the front line indicates that the recruitment of such individuals appears driven by the desire to increase the sheer numbers of Russia's front line forces, and little or no concern about their quality and combat readiness, nor (considering the language barriers in particular) their effective integration into the forces. This speaks both about the military strategy (overpowering the adversary by numbers) but also about the overall apparent disregard for human life.

Nalin from Sri Lanka (mentioned above) described to Amnesty International being taken to the training centre Avangard, right after he signed the contract. "No one explained anything, and I did not understand anything about what was going on. For the first few days in the camp, I simply repeated what others around me were doing. My phone and passport were taken from me." After 14 days of such training, Nalin was deployed to the front line. His commander and most of the other soldiers in his unit were Russian, except for a few other foreigners. The commander did not speak much English, but by then Nalin had managed to understand some Russian. He was also paired with a Russian soldier who spoke a bit of English. Nalin was captured after less than two weeks at the front line, in April 2024. Since then, he has been a POW in a camp in western Ukraine. He claims he has never received any payment under the Russian contract. He has a wife and two children at home in Sri Lanka.

Pedro,[22] an IT professional from Brazil, spoke to Amnesty International during four consecutive visits to the POW camp in Ukraine. Recruited while he was working in Australia, he shared that after signing what he thought was a contract for a well-paid IT job in Russia, he was taken to the Avangard centre, which was described to him by the personnel there as "a place for the guys who go to war." Pedro said that in Avangard, he encountered many Russian nationals and also many foreign nationals, including from Mexico, China, India and Sri Lanka. During his time there, Pedro "did not understand anything, no one spoke English". He was held there for three weeks before being deployed to the front line. Pedro asked his commander if he could leave, but the answer was: "At some point you will leave. If you try to escape, you will either go to jail or we will kill you." Pedro served for 11 months before he was captured. He claims he has never received any payment after arriving in Russia.

4.2 RESTRICTION OF LIBERTY AND PHYSICAL CONTROL, INCLUDING WITHHOLDING OF PASSPORTS

A recurring allegation which Amnesty International heard from all third-country nationals interviewed for this research, is that of severe restriction or deprivation of liberty of movement after signing (knowingly or unknowingly) the military contract immediately upon arrival to Russia.

POWs from Brazil and Sri Lanka interviewed by Amnesty International shared that their passports and mobile phones and other electronic communication devices were taken away from them, in some cases during the training, in other cases prior to front line deployment. "They took everything before I left Avangard, my phone, my laptop and my passport. None was ever returned," said Pedro from Brazil. Nalin,

[22] In person interview with Amnesty International, 24 April 2025, 30 July 2025, 26 March 2026, 25 June 2026

from Sri Lanka, also shared that after the two-week training, just before he had been sent to the front line "in Donetsk" (a regional capital in Russian-occupied Ukraine) his passport had been taken away.

Interviewees from Cuba, Colombia, South Africa and Sri Lanka stated that they could not leave the facility into which they were placed after signing the paperwork. When taken to the bank to open an account, or to the military hospital for medical examination, they were accompanied in a vehicle without knowing where they were going and then returned to the same facility. Transportation to the training centres was also carried out in a secretive way. In some cases, the prisoners were woken up in the middle of the night and ordered to board a bus and then spent several days onboard, without any understanding of where they were or the final destination.

"Jorge",[23] interviewed in the POW camp in June 2026, came across an online advertisement for job opportunities in Russia, while in his home country, Colombia. He called the Colombian phone number as advertised, and soon, in November 2025, was on a flight to Russia, via Istanbul, for what was promised to be a civilian job. In Istanbul, he was met at the airport by someone whom he described as a Colombian recruiter (Jorge gave this person's name), and from Istanbul he proceeded to Ufa, Bashkortostan, in the southern foothills of the Ural mountains in Russia. In Ufa, Jorge was accommodated in a place that looked to him like a military hospital, and where he was told to sign some paperwork in Russian which he did not understand. Among the first Russian words he learnt were "*bystro, bystro*" ("hurry, hurry") and "*potom*" ("later") which he heard multiple times while being told to sign the papers and follow other instructions. His stay in Ufa was followed by a three-day-long bus journey to an unknown location which everyone called "polygon", where he was accommodated in a bunker. Like other new arrivals, Jorge was given an assault rifle and a military uniform. He asked why he needed one and insisted that he was a civilian, in response to which he was told that the front line was near and he needed to know how to defend himself. From the "polygon" Jorge was driven to a small village several hours away, where he could hear the sounds of artillery shelling, and from there, in a small car, to the trenches in the combat zone. After three days alone in a trench and communicating with his superiors via a drone flying overhead, controlled by Russian operators, he asked to be evacuated. Shortly after, a Russian man, who said he was "the commander," came to the trench and told Jorge to move and follow directions from the drone. But first "the commander" removed and took away the armour plates from Jorge's protective vest ("So you can run faster," he said). Jorge described the unfamiliar terrain as "some woods, rivers, many trees. And many dead bodies. There were so many dead bodies that I first thought they were mannequins." He encountered a wounded Colombian, hiding under a bridge, who said that everyone in his unit had been killed. Thereafter Jorge refused to obey the drone operator's instructions to keep going, and stayed with his wounded compatriot until they were taken prisoner by members of the Ukrainian forces. Jorge does not know the fate of the wounded man.

"Luis",[24] another Colombian with a professional military background, was in October 2025 offered a job through a friend, as a security contractor in Russian-occupied Ukraine. According to Luis, his friend had found employment in the United Arab Emirates through a recruitment agency. The same agency then offered him "a better deal" in Russia, with a monthly salary of US$ 3,000 a month (compared to US$ 500 he could earn in Colombia). Luis followed his friend's lead. He too travelled to Ufa in Russia, via Istanbul where he was as well met by the same intermediary as Jorge (see above; Luis gave the same name, independently of Jorge). At the airport in Ufa, his passport was taken away from him by men who he described as "three Russians and one African." "They were very rude [and] took away my passport. [They] then took me to a building where I stayed with other Colombians and Africans." He spent seven days in Ufa undergoing medical tests, having a local bank account opened and completing other administrative tasks. After that, Luis spent three days in a bus, with seven other Colombians and 35 Africans, in transfer to the "polygon."

"After the polygon they started taking us closer to the front line, sending us there in small groups. There were so many deaths. I heard rumours that those who refused to go were simply disappearing. The group that went before me, when I came, I saw all of them dead, but I was told just to keep on going."

[23] In person interview with Amnesty International, 25 June 2026
[24] In person interview with Amnesty International, 25 June 2026

Luis was deployed to the front line on 29 November 2025 and captured on 10 December 2025.

Several interviewees told Amnesty International that their passports were taken away from them. This immediately restricted their freedom of movement. Without a passport, not only they no longer could travel out of the country. It is a widespread practice in Russia for police and members of other law enforcement agencies to request that an individual present their passport on the spot, and being stopped by police in the street for a passport inspection is commonplace. By law, random passport checks are not permitted, and the circumstances in which an individual may be requested to show their ID are strictly limited. In practice, police may arbitrarily cite such circumstances (for instance, by claiming that "there are grounds to believe that the person is wanted by the authorities" - a direct reference to Article 13 on the Law "On Police") without having to prove that these are in place. Where this happens, a failure to present their passport or an attempt to dispute legality of the passport inspection may result in an immediate detention and delivery to the police station ("to take measures to identify the said person" - under the same Law), and/or accusation of a "failure to comply with a lawful order or demand of a police officer" (Article 19.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences), which is an offence punishable by a hefty fine or so-called administrative detention for up to 15 day, and in the case of a foreign national, deportation. Racial profiling and random ID inspections targeting non-Russian nationals by police is commonplace in Russia. To put it simply, withholding someone's passport in practice instantly deprives them of freedom of movement, and makes them vulnerable to further abuses.

5. APPLICABLE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Russia is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery (Slavery Convention) and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. Russia ceased to be a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) on 16 September 2022, following its expulsion from the Council of Europe after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It nonetheless remains fully bound by customary international law, including prohibitions on slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking. Russia is a member of the 2008 Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (the Anti-Trafficking Convention) and is fully bound by the UN Palermo Protocol which it signed on 12 December 2000 and ratified on 26 May 2004.

Under international law, states must criminalize practices like trafficking, forced labour and enslavement, and adopt comprehensive policies and coordinated action against such practices.[25] The Palermo Protocol also obliges states parties to protect and assist victims of human trafficking, with full respect for their human rights.[26]

Human trafficking is specifically prohibited in the Russian Criminal Code, under Article 127.1 ("Trafficking in persons"). However, Russia has been consistently criticized for weak and inconsistent enforcement of the relevant provisions and obligations. In particular, the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), in its latest observations on Russia (from 2024, published in 2025) "Articles 1(1), 2(1) and 25 of the [Forced Labour] Convention. Trafficking in persons"[27] noted Russia's repeated failure "to provide detailed information on the measures taken to strengthen the legal and institutional framework to combat trafficking in persons, for both labour and sexual exploitation, as well

[25] Palermo Protocol, Article 5. Article 6 of the 1926 Slavery Convention mandates that state parties "whose laws do not already make provision for severe penalties in respect of infractions of laws and regulations enacted for the purpose of giving effect to the present Convention undertake to adopt the necessary measures in order that such penalties may be imposed." Under Article 6 of the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, "[t]he act of enslaving another person or of inducing another person to give himself or a person dependent upon him into slavery, or of attempting these acts, or being accessory thereto, or being a party to a conspiracy to accomplish any such acts, shall be a criminal offence under the laws of the States Parties to this Convention and persons convicted thereof shall be liable to punishment."
[26] Palermo Protocol, Article 2(b) read with Articles 6 to 8.
[27] International Labor Organization, Articles 1(1), 2(1) and 25 of the Forced Labor Convention. Trafficking in persons, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13100:0::NO::P13100_COMMENT_ID%2CP13100_LANG_CODE:4417502%2Cen

as to ensure better coordination among the relevant State structures with a view to combating trafficking in persons effectively." The CEACR reported that 16 persons were convicted under Article 127.1 in both 2021 and 2020, and 11 in 2022, the latest quoted record, which predates Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These figures appear very low and give rise to concerns, given Russia's large migrant labour market and documented vulnerabilities.[28]

Article 3(a) of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (the Palermo Protocol) defines human trafficking as

> *… the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, or the removal of organs.*[29]

Article 3(b) clarifies that that "[t]he consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used." Notably, Article 3(a) of the Protocol lists not only force and threats but also coercion, fraud, deception, abuse of power, and abuse of a position of vulnerability as prohibited means of trafficking. Consequently, a victim may be trafficked even where no physical confinement or violence is involved.

The UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have also repeatedly affirmed that trafficking violates and impairs fundamental human rights. For example, in its resolution 78/228, *Improving the coordination of efforts against trafficking in persons*, the General Assembly reiterated that trafficking in persons "impairs the enjoyment of human rights" and emphasized states' obligations to protect victims.[30] Similarly, the Human Rights Council, in its resolution 53/9, *Trafficking in persons, especially women and children*, reaffirmed that trafficking violates human rights.[31]

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[28] Unlike human trafficking, enslavement (*poraboscheniye*) is not expressly criminalized under Russian domestic law. Instead, Russia criminalizes the "use of slave labour" (Article 127.2 of the Criminal Code, available at: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/d9997ad420efb5277afbabe009c87f15895214cf/, which implies the use of the labour of a person where the person is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to refuse the work or provide services. The relevant wording expressly incorporates the concept of exercising "powers attached to the right of ownership" over a person. Aggravating circumstances include multiple victims, abuse of official position, violence or threats, confiscation of identity documents, organized-group involvement, and cases resulting in death or serious injury. The European Court of Human Rights case law points to deficiencies in Russia's response to the requirements of Article 4 of the ECHR ("Prohibition of slavery and forced labour"). In F.M. and Others v. Russia (2024), the Court found failures in victim protection, identification and investigation of trafficking and exploitation claims (the decision concerns Article 4 of the ECHR rather than interpretation of Article 127.2 of the Russian Criminal Code). Human rights monitors and analysts of Russian case law have observed that Russian authorities have often applied Article 127.2 restrictively, frequently requiring evidence of a high degree of physical or practical control over the victim, and putting the onus of proof on the victims, and interpreting "slave labour" narrowly. A lawyer for an NGO working on slave labour told media that "even with evidence of threats, physical violence, and confinement, courts often do not recognize the fact of slavery." The same media report, from April 2025, pointed out that over 15 years, just 53 criminal cases had been officially registered (and presumably, reached courts) under Article 127.2 of Russia's Criminal Code, but that international organizations estimate the number of victims of modern slavery in Russia at no less than 7,000 people." (The Insider, "Russia is swamped with sexual slavery cases, but law enforcement masks them with other charges", 17 April 2025, https://theins.press/en/news/280678. See also Sychenko, Gracheva & Rodichev, "Modern Slavery in Russia: Exploitation without Chains", Italian Labour Law e-Journal, Vol 14 No.1, 2021, https://illej.unibo.it/article/view/13353.)

[29] Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime.

[30] UN GA, Improving the coordination of efforts against trafficking in persons, 19 December 2023, digitallibrary.un.org/record/4033020/files/A_RES_78_228-EN.pdf

[31] UN, Trafficking in persons, especially women and children, 12 July 2023, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4020282?v=pdf

The violation of human trafficking has also been addressed by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In *Rantsev Vs Cyprus and Russia* the ECtHR ruled that the victim had been subject to exploitation under Article 4, despite Article 4 of the ECHR, which prohibits slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour, not explicitly prohibiting human trafficking. It drew upon the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's Kunarac judgement, and ruled:

> *In light of the proliferation of both trafficking itself and of measures taken to combat it, the Court considers it appropriate in the present case to examine the extent to which trafficking itself may be considered to run counter to the spirit and purpose of Article 4 of the Convention such as to fall within the scope of the guarantees offered by that Article without the need to assess which of the three types of proscribed conduct are engaged by the particular treatment in the case in question.*
>
> *There can be no doubt that trafficking threatens the human dignity and fundamental freedoms of its victims and cannot be considered compatible with a democratic society and the values expounded in the Convention. In view of its obligation to interpret the Convention in light of present-day conditions, the Court considers it unnecessary to identify whether the treatment about which the applicant complains constitutes "slavery", "servitude" or "forced and compulsory labour". Instead, the Court concludes that trafficking itself, within the meaning of Article 3(a) of the Palermo Protocol and Article 4(a) of the Anti-Trafficking Convention, falls within the scope of Article 4 of the Convention.*

Many of the practices reported to Amnesty International in the process of this research, in some instances relating to the military recruitment described above, and in most cases to the treatment of the recruits after signing the military contract and particularly at the front line, have also included: control or restrictions of movement, measures to deter or prevent escape, control of physical environment, psychological control or pressure, threat of force or coercion. All of these, amongst others, are factors which may demonstrate the "exercise of powers attaching to the right of ownership," as part of a situation of enslavement.[32] Slavery is a crime under international law and a serious violation of international human rights law.[33] Where indicators of enslavement are present in relation to the treatment of foreign recruits to the Russian Armed Forces, these should be urgently investigated and all persons suspected of criminal responsibility must be brought to account in fair trials.

[32] Slavery is defined in international law as "the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised." (League of Nations, Slavery Convention (1926) 60 LNTS 254, entered into force on 9 March 1927 ["1926 Slavery Convention"] Articles 1(1); Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956), 266 UNTS 40, entered into force on 30 April 1957.) The International Criminal Court has interpreted the powers attaching to the right of ownership as "the use, enjoyment and disposal of a person who is regarded as property, by placing him or her in a situation of dependence which entails his or her deprivation of any form of autonomy" (ICC, Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga, Case ICC-01/04-01/07, Trial Chamber II, Judgment, 7 March 2014, para. 975). See also, Policy on Slavery Crimes of the OTP of the ICC; ICTY, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac et al.*, Case IT-96-23 &-IT-96-23/1-A, Appeals Chamber Judgment, 12 June 2002, paras. 118-119.

[33] 1926 Slavery Convention, 1956 Supplementary Convention. When committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, enslavement may also constitute crime against humanity (Rome Statute, Article 7(1)(2)(c), read with Article 7(2)(c)). International and regional human rights law, specifically Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, prohibit slavery and forced or compulsory labour. The prohibition of slavery is also a peremptory norm of international law (jus cogens) from which no derogation is permitted (International Law Commission (ILC), Draft conclusions on identification and legal consequences of peremptory norms of general international law (jus cogens), Yearbook of the International Law Commission, 2022, Volume II, Part Two, Conclusion 23 & Annex).

CONCLUSION

Amnesty International's research points to a pattern whereby the recruitment of foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces, whether targeting migrants and refugees already present in Russia and in a precarious situation, or individuals recruited abroad under false pretences, relied on practices of deception, fraudulence or coercion, under the false promise of civilian or non-combative employment. These include the signing of military contracts drawn up in a language which they do not understand, and in circumstances in which they appear compelled to sign without explanation of the consequences or offer of an alternative. Subsequent restrictions on movement and lack of choice in following military orders have ensued, with any attempt to resign from the army reportedly met by coercion, including by direct threats.

The documented allegations provide evidence of the elements of the crime of trafficking in persons. The testimonies of the recruited individuals indicate that, in most if not all cases, those targeted did not give fully informed or voluntary consent to participate in hostilities. Pursuant to Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol, consent on the part of victims is irrelevant when means such as coercion, fraud, deception and/or abuse of a position of vulnerability have been employed. Where such means were employed for the purpose of exploitation, the individuals concerned should be treated as victims and survivors of human trafficking.

The patterns documented raise serious concerns regarding Russia's violations of its international law obligations, including its involvement in human trafficking and failure to effectively combat human trafficking, conduct prompt and effective investigations of all reported crimes and serious human rights abuses, identify and protect victims and survivors, and bring to account all persons suspected of being responsible or complicit in such practices. Moreover, the testimonies collected by Amnesty International during its research for this publication suggest that such practices, including in cases amounting to trafficking in persons, are widespread in Russia in relation to foreign individuals in precarious situations, and that official bodies, including the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence, may be directly complicit in these practices.

Amnesty International's research and the concurrent evidence collected did not allow identification of the precise relationships between every recruiter, intermediary, and Russian state institution involved in recruitment networks operating outside Russia. Nonetheless, the recurring recruitment patterns documented in this report, across multiple countries, strongly suggest a degree of coordination, cooperation or collusion between recruiters and official actors within Russia responsible for processing, training, and deploying recruits.

Human trafficking often involves a chain of actors performing different functions, and identifying formal and informal links between individual recruiters operating abroad and Russian state authorities would require further investigation. There is no doubt, however, that the Russian authorities have at the very least created and facilitated an enabling environment for the abusive recruitment practices – and knowingly benefited from these to boost their armed forces.

While foreign nationals—primarily from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—are drawn into an armed conflict under conditions that undermine their human rights and expose them to serious harm, the transnational nature of these abusive recruitment practices extends the human impact of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine beyond Ukraine's borders, embedding it within global inequalities and discriminatory or abusive migration dynamics. Addressing these patterns requires sustained scrutiny, at the national, regional and global levels, and international cooperation, to ensure accountability where violations occur, including individual criminal responsibility, and to protect those at risk of being drawn into hostilities under deceptive or coercive conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls on Russia to:
Immediately put an end to all reported abusive practices that involve the recruitment of foreign nationals for its military forces and their treatment in training centres and at the front line. This includes recruitment through coercion, deception, misinformation, or exploitation of economic, legal or other vulnerability of foreign nationals in Russia and of individuals from economically disadvantaged communities in the rest of the world, as well as restrictions on their movement once in Russia or Russian-occupied Ukraine, including by means of seizure of identity/travel documents, measures to deter or prevent their escape, control of physical environment, threat of force and other forms of coercion. In particular, the authorities must:

- Take immediate steps to dismantle any state practices or arrangements that facilitate trafficking in persons and other forms of exploitation for the purpose of recruiting foreign nationals into Russia's military forces and auxiliary front line services. Investigate and prosecute all acts of trafficking in persons involving state officials, including within the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence, and others performing public functions (e.g. notaries), or persons acting with the acquiescence of the authorities.

- Put on hold and cease any ongoing and future recruitment of foreign nationals into its military forces and auxiliary front line services, until and unless minimum standards and effective enforcement are in place regarding prevention and combating of human trafficking, in Russian law and in practice;

- Expressly and clearly prohibit in law coercive and abusive recruitment practices and practices amounting to human trafficking and strictly enforce their prohibition in practice. In particular prohibit and end, among others, abusive practices which facilitate exploitation by linking military service, or any other employment, to migration status regularisation, avoidance of detention or deportation, or reduction of criminal penalties;

- Immediately cease the practice of abusing the vulnerability of migrants and refugees in Russia to subject them to, or threaten them with, arbitrary or prolonged detention, deportation, or arbitrary penalties to recruit them into military forces;

- Ensure non-punishment of victims and survivors for offences committed as a direct result of being trafficked or subjected to abuse;

- Ensure that all foreign nationals have effective access to legal assistance, consular services, and independent complaint mechanisms;

- Fully and effectively guarantee labour rights protections, including by ensuring payment of all wages and benefits promised, and providing effective remedies for non-payment;

- Investigate each and every reported allegation of abusive military recruitment practice and all reported and suspected instances of recruited foreign nationals being restricted in their movement upon arrival in Russia, and/or, if subject to abusive or coercive recruitment, denied their choice to end their deployment, and hold accountable, in fair trial proceedings, any person suspected of involvement or complicity in practices that amount to human trafficking or other human rights violations, including recruiters, other intermediaries, migration and military officials, and commanding officers;

- Immediately decommission any foreign national currently deployed who chooses to leave the service, without threat, penalty or any other reprisals, and ensure their immediate and safe departure from the front line territories;

- Ensure that all foreign nationals recruited into the military forces receive in full their promised remuneration, and that they, as well as their families where applicable, receive full and effective reparations for the harm suffered as a result of abusive (fraudulent, deceptive, coercive, or exploitative) recruitment practices and abusive treatment during training and at the front line. This should include, where appropriate:
    - payment of all outstanding wages and contractual benefits, and compensation for all related expenses such as international travel, recruitment agents' fees, etc.;
    - restitution and compensation for the harm suffered, including physical and psychological injury;
    - compensation to families of those killed or missing in action;
    - immediate and full disclosure, to all legitimate stakeholders (families, national authorities, etc.), of all available information on the relevant individuals' fate, whereabouts, individual circumstances and legal status, including on all missing persons, combatants the front line, detainees, etc.;
    - taking all practical and lawful steps as necessary, to assist and ensure genuinely voluntary returns, of foreign nationals who have been subjected to human trafficking who wish to return to their country of origin; fully respect the principle of non-refoulement by ensuring that refugees and other foreign nationals at risk of persecution or serious human rights violations in their countries of origin are not forcibly returned, threatened with deportation, or arbitrarily deprived of their regular protection status in Russia.

- Commit to and strengthen international legal cooperation, and fully comply with and implement obligations under international treaties on trafficking, as well as enslavement and forced labour, including the Palermo Protocol, relevant ILO conventions, and applicable customary international law standards, as well as the applicable Council of Europe legislation and ECtHR caselaw;

- Take immediate practical steps to ensure cross-border investigations and accountability, including by strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation with countries of origin and international law enforcement bodies, to conduct and facilitate investigations and effectively identify, disrupt, and prosecute transnational trafficking and abusive recruitment networks, including those operating online;

- Engage constructively with civil society organizations; allow and facilitate independent monitoring by national and international civil society organizations working on trafficking and refugees' and migrants' rights;

- Re-engage constructively with international and regional human rights mechanisms, including UN Special Procedures, treaty bodies, and ILO supervisory mechanisms, as well as the ECtHR, and facilitate country visits related to trafficking, labour exploitation, and migration.

Amnesty International calls on the states whose nationals are at risk of, or have been affected by, abusive recruitment into the Russian military forces and/or abusive treatment in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine, to:

- Take proactive measures to protect their nationals, including by issuing clear public warnings and guidance on the risks of deceptive or fraudulent recruitment schemes linked to employment in Russia or third countries;

- Strengthen oversight and regulation of recruitment actors, including agencies, intermediaries, and online platforms operating domestically or across borders;

- Provide consular protection and assistance to affected nationals and their families, including those detained, missing, or held as prisoners of war;

- Engage with the Russian and Ukrainian authorities to facilitate the voluntary return and reintegration of affected nationals who have been subjected to human trafficking and/or other human rights violations, including through access to legal, medical and financial support;

- Investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute individuals and networks involved in human trafficking and other deceptive or coercive recruitment practices targeting their nationals or involving third-country nationals on their territory;

- Identify individuals recruited through deception, coercion, or abuse of vulnerability as potential victims of human trafficking and/or other crimes under international law, and ensure that victims and survivors of such crimes are treated as such. Refrain from prosecuting or penalizing such individuals for acts directly resulting from their exploitation, and ensure their access to protection, assistance, and effective remedies;

- Engage in bilateral and multilateral efforts, including with Russian, Ukrainian and other relevant national authorities and international mechanisms, to seek accountability and remedies for nationals subjected to coercion, exploitation, or abuse;

- Where there is a sufficient legal and factual basis, exercise universal jurisdiction or other forms of extraterritorial jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute individuals suspected of criminal responsibility for crimes under international law, including human trafficking, including recruiters, intermediaries, complicit Russian or other officials, and other accomplices, irrespective of where the offences were committed or the nationality of the perpetrators.

Amnesty International calls on Ukraine to:

- Ensure that all prisoners, including third country nationals from among prisoners of war, are treated fully in accordance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law, without adverse distinction based on nationality, ethnicity, or recruitment pathway into Russian military forces;

- Facilitate communication between prisoners of war and their families, ensure prompt and effective access to their respective government's consular assistance, and take necessary practical steps to address language, literacy, documentation or other barriers;

- Take steps to identify foreign prisoners of war who may have been recruited through deception, coercion, fraud or abuse of vulnerability as potential victims or survivors of human trafficking, for the purposes of subjecting them to an individualized screening as per the recommendation below;

- Pursuant to Article 21 of Geneva Conventions (III) Relative to The Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, the authorities should consider doing an individualized screening, for the purpose of release on parole or promise to their country of origin (taking account of risks of refoulement), of victims and survivors of human trafficking held as prisoners of war in Ukraine. Such screening should consider credible suspicion of persons' involvement in acts that may amount to crimes under international law or serious crimes under domestic law that are consistent with grave breaches of international humanitarian law, and may also take account of other security concerns, including the possibility of the individual re engaging in the conflict;

- Ensure that the screening process is human rights compliant including incorporating best practices in relation to combating human trafficking and other human rights violations, to identify victims and survivors of human trafficking and/or other crimes under international law, and ensure their rights as victims; and, to the extent feasible, preserve any evidence that could provide accountability for those responsible for human trafficking;

- Ensure that foreign nationals released following such a screening process are able to voluntarily return to their home country, including by facilitating consular access and provision of travel documentation;

- Handle information obtained from third-country nationals among prisoners of war in a manner that ensures confidentiality and protection, and does not expose them or their families to retaliation, reprisals, or other harm, including by Russian authorities or intermediaries;

- Engage with relevant states, the ICRC, and other competent international organisations to explore lawful pathways for repatriation, return, or other durable solutions for third-country nationals, in line with international humanitarian and human rights law.

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

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