Over 70 Ugandans forced to fight in Ukraine – families



Mr Innocent Kato, a twin brother to Johnson Kakuru, who was allegedly taken to Russia, talks to a group of women who claim their husbands face the same fate, in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO/ABUBAKER LUBOWA

This newspaper has learnt that many of the recruits were only assisted with visas and travel arrangements but were never issued formal employment contracts from Uganda.

BY KARIM MUYOBO

At least 79 Ugandans are feared trapped in Russia after allegedly being lured into a fraudulent overseas recruitment scheme that saw them deployed to the front lines of the Russia–Ukraine war without proper contracts, training or communication, relatives have said.

Family members told this publication yesterday that the victims, most of them men aged between 27 and 47, were recruited in 2024 by a suspected trafficking network fronted by a Russian national who promised them lucrative security jobs abroad.

According to relatives, many of the victims had previous experience working in conflict zones such as Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, but had remained unemployed for extended periods, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Visa arrangements

Mr Innocent Kato, an air cargo transport officer and one of the relatives following up the matter, said the recruits were only assisted with visas and travel arrangements but were never issued formal employment contracts in Uganda.

"There were no contracts signed in Uganda and it was done secretly. Most families only found out when the men had already reached [Russia capital] Moscow," Mr Kato said.

He added that the men travelled through different countries, including Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Sudan, in what appeared to be an attempt to avoid detection by authorities.

The revelations come months after Ugandan security operatives intercepted nine men at Entebbe International Airport in August last year, who were suspected to be travelling to Moscow as part of a mercenary recruitment drive linked to the war.

Upon arrival in Russia, relatives say the men were picked up from the airport and taken directly to military camps, where they were allegedly forced to sign military contracts at gunpoint.

"They were threatened and forced to sign; they had no choice. They expected to be paid during training, but never received any money because the accounts are managed by that same person," Mr Kato said.

He said the recruits were reportedly subjected to only two to three weeks of military training before being deployed to active combat zones in Ukraine. "They were taken straight to the battlefield. That training is insufficient for such a war," he said.

Another relative, Ms Annet Nakesi, whose husband, Mr John Male is reportedly among those trapped in Russia, said communication with the group was cut off shortly after deployment, with the last known messages received in early February.

"One morning, some men offered my husband a deal to go to Russia because he had worked in Iraq as a security personnel. In the audio messages he shared, he said they were forcing him to sign contracts to join the army and fight in the war, without proper training," she said.

Ms Nakesi appealed to the government to intervene and secure the return of the affected Ugandans.

"We request President Museveni and the government to help bring them back. Our husbands went to work, not to fight a war," she said.

The State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Henry Okello-Oryem, has repeatedly warned Ugandans against accepting jobs abroad that are not officially sanctioned by government.

"I have always advised, and it is on record, that Ugandans travelling abroad for any job should desist unless it is officially sanctioned by the government," Mr Oryem said.

"That means we should have an agreement with the country we are exporting labour to," he added.

GROWING TREND

The case mirrors similar reports from other African countries. Recent investigations in Kenya and Zimbabwe indicate that hundreds of Africans have been deceived into joining Russian forces under the guise of lucrative employment opportunities. Human rights groups and analysts have described the schemes as exploitative, targeting economically vulnerable individuals with false promises that conceal the realities of combat deployment. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it is engaging diplomatic channels to establish the status of the Ugandans and explore possible avenues for their safe return.

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