



EDITORIAL

Govt should not play the ostrich with head in sand

Kiev's revelation in February that more than 1,780 citizens from 36 African countries are estimated to be fighting alongside Russia in Ukraine was disturbing on many levels. Just as disturbing is the sense of powerlessness that Kampala has vigorously defended when confronted with news that a number of Ugandan citizens are caught in the crosshairs, having taken up arms to fight in the war.

Henry Oryem Okello, the junior Foreign Affairs minister, has told all and sundry that the Government of Uganda (GoU) can only do so much, not least because the Ugandans in question signed contracts to fight alongside the Russian army without Kampala's knowledge. On the surface, this sounds exculpatory enough. Yet recent accounts that 79 Ugandan males aged between 27 and 47 are holed up in Ukraine's war-torn regions cannot be wished away.

We believe that the GoU should be actively involved in mapping the contours of the trafficking network that coaxed the Ugandans to travel to Ukraine. Reports indicate that a Russian national whetted the appetite of the aforesaid Ugandans by dangling the promise of lucrative security jobs. That this is a classic case of trafficking in human beings is not in doubt. It meets the three constituent elements of trafficking as outlined by the Palermo Protocol—the act (i.e. what is done), the means (i.e. how it is done), and the purpose (i.e. why it is done).

All of this means that the GoU cannot keep kicking the can down the road. We insist that it has to be the GoU's business to ensure the safety of anyone that carries a Ugandan passport, regardless of how they ended up not being in their care. Yet, a few months ago, a picture of a Ugandan who died on the battlefield in Ukraine went viral with not much of an official response from the GoU. The cover of not having given the all clear for the externalisation or export of labour, as it were, to Russia does not and should not suffice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MEA) should instead work its contacts and burn the midnight oil to ensure the safe return of any Ugandan who has fallen through the cracks.

Above all, the GoU should have a moment of introspection that culminates in it peeling away the layers of sorrow that force Ugandans to seriously consider doing what by all accounts are odd jobs outside their native country.

These push and pull factors have always been taken lightly by state actors. There has to be a deep-seated interest in not just trying but ultimately creating a Uganda that works for all. Not just some.

Since we are talking about an episode where trafficking of human beings has resulted in forced labour, we urge the GoU to come out and officially articulate its response. Evidently, the export of labour we are speaking of is an out-and-out affront to human rights instruments and international labour protocols. It should, therefore, be treated as such. No proverbial can should be kicked down the road, as has always been the case.

The issue:

Human trafficking.

Our view:

Since we are talking about an episode where trafficking of human beings has resulted in forced labour, we urge the GoU to come out and officially articulate its response.

Our commitment to you

We pledge:

- To be accurate and fair in all we do.
- To be respectful to all in our pursuit of the truth.
- To refuse to accept any compensation beyond that provided by Monitor Publications Ltd. for what we do in our news gathering and decision-making.