The hidden cost of recruiting Africans into foreign wars

BY JAMES W. NJOGU

As the Russia–Ukraine war grinds on with no clear end in sight, its consequences are spreading far beyond Europe. One of the least examined, but potentially most dangerous developments is the recruitment of Africans, including Ugandans, into the conflict.

What may appear as an individual survival choice today could become a collective security crisis for African states tomorrow.

The war began in February 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Initially framed as a short "special military operation", the war quickly evolved into a prolonged and brutal conflict.

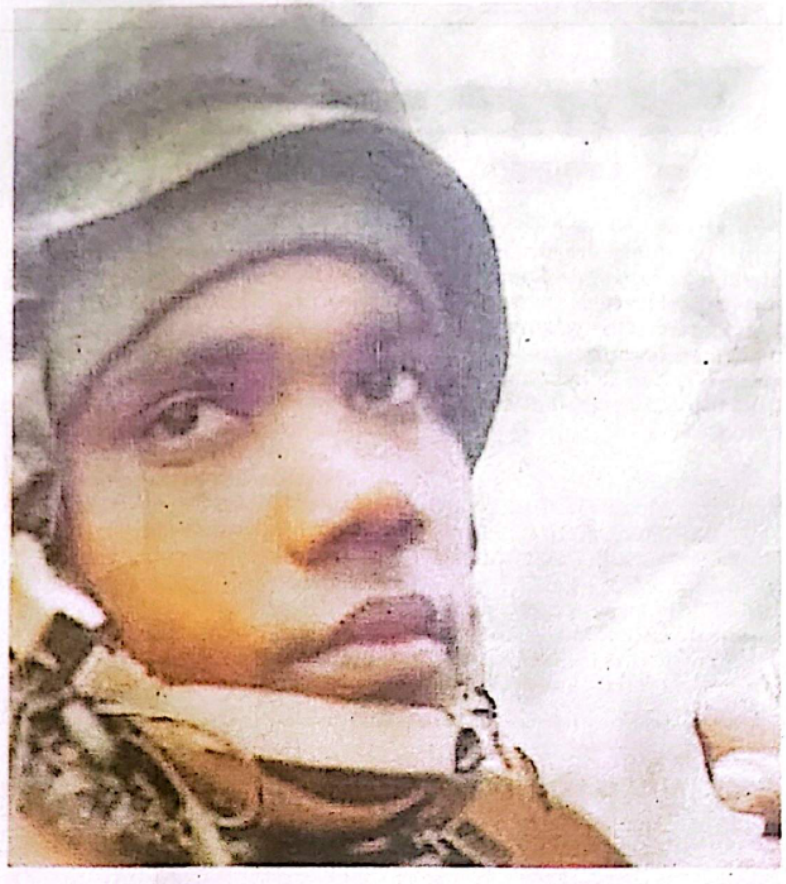
Facing mounting casualties and declining domestic recruitment, Russia increasingly relied on alternative manpower sources, including mercenaries, prisoners, and foreign nationals.

Private military companies, most notably the Wagner Group, were heavily deployed in some of the deadliest battles. As the war intensified, recruitment quietly expanded to Africa.

Young African men, many already living in Russia as students or migrant workers, were approached with promises of well-paying jobs, residency permits, or fast-tracked citizenship. Others were recruited through informal agents or online advertisements, often without full disclosure of the risks involved.

For many, the reality was starkly different. Instead of civilian jobs or rearline duties, recruits found themselves sent to active combat zones with limited training and inadequate equipment.

Accounts from survivors and families suggest that African fighters were frequently deployed to frontline positions, exposed to extreme danger, and treated as expendable. Communication barriers, racial discrimination, and lack of legal protection worsened their vulnerability.



Clinton Nyapara Mogesa, who was fighting in the Russia-Ukraine war. PHOTO/COURTESY

This exploitation thrives on desperation. Poverty, unemployment, and rising living costs across Africa have made foreign opportunities, real or imagined, deeply attractive. In most African countries where youth unemployment remains high, the promise of quick income can override caution. The lack of reliable information and weak oversight of recruitment networks makes deception easy and accountability rare.

History offers a troubling warning. Africans recruited to fight in the First and Second World Wars returned home with combat skills and political awareness that later shaped liberation movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

While those struggles helped dismantle colonial rule, they also contributed to prolonged armed conflicts, coups, and militarisation in the post-independence era.



Ticking timebomb. When these fighters return, often traumatised, unemployed, and unsupported, the danger does not disappear at the airport. In fragile or politically tense states, such returnees could be drawn into criminal gangs, private militias, extremist groups, or rebel movements. The combination of military expertise and economic desperation is a volatile mix. Africa has already witnessed how small groups of trained fighters can destabilise entire regions."– James W. Njogu, author

Today's situation carries similar risks, but with one critical difference: modern warfare. African recruits in Ukraine are being exposed to advanced weapons, drone technology, coordinated battlefield tactics, and psychological conditioning unlike anything previously seen. When these fighters return, often traumatised, unemployed, and unsupported, the danger does not disappear at the airport.

In fragile or politically tense states, such returnees could be drawn into criminal gangs, private militias, extremist groups, or rebel movements. The combination of military expertise and economic desperation is a volatile mix. Africa has already witnessed how small groups of trained fighters can destabilise entire regions.

Yet African governments appear largely unprepared. There is little public discussion, limited data on the number of recruits, and almost no visible planning for reintegration or rehabilitation. Preventive measures, such as monitoring recruitment networks, engaging diplomatically with host countries, and warning citizens about the risks remain weak or absent.

This silence is dangerous. Governments must act on two fronts. First, they must prevent further recruitment by strengthening laws against human trafficking and illegal conscription, while actively informing citizens about deceptive recruitment practices. Second, they must prepare for the return of those already involved by establishing rehabilitation programmes that include psychological support, vocational training, and reintegration into civilian life.

Most importantly, African states must confront the root cause: poverty. As long as large numbers of young people see foreign wars as an economic opportunity, exploitation will continue.

The Russia–Ukraine war may be fought in Europe, but its aftershocks are already being felt in Africa. Ignoring the issue now risks importing tomorrow's insecurity, one traumatised fighter at a time.

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