

MAKANDAY

weekly

TRUSTED. BOLD. INDEPENDENT



12 - 18TH SEPTEMBER 2025



ISSUE. NO 004

BLOOD ON THE COPPER:

The Zambian Minister, The Mysterious Businesswoman and Illegal Mining (Part II)



African Governments Collude with the Russian Recruitment of Young Women into its Arms Industry

Late last year, the world was alerted to the disturbing news that Russia was recruiting hundreds of young African women, aged 18–22, to manufacture drones in a military-industrial compound 1,000 km east of Moscow, called the Alabuga Special Economic Zone. The reports also stated that the recruits—from at least fifteen African countries—were promised good salaries and skills training, but once there, they were often trapped, facing tax deductions, dangerous working conditions, strict surveillance, and difficulties returning home.

In the past six months, a team from ZAM and NAIRE in seven African countries investigated the Russian recruitment exercise—asking why so many young Africans take the chance to go, sometimes even after being warned.

A “hundred more this year”

Among the shocking findings of this transnational investigation, launched today, is the involvement of high-ranking government officials in six of the seven countries—and the tacit approval in all seven—in sending their countries’ young women abroad. In Cameroon, a ruling party VIP and member of the Cameroon-Russia Business Council has actively taken 13 recruits to Alabuga and reportedly plans to supply Russia with “a hundred more this year.”

A Kenyan and a Nigerian ambassador have been promoting the initiative on-site in Moscow and at Alabuga itself. In Rwanda, “orders from above” have allowed female students to travel to Russia “for vague purposes.” The Ugandan embassy and a parliamentarian have actively accompanied a contingent of recruits, making them among the first to arrive at Alabuga. The Nigerian Ministry of Education advertises the scholarship opportunity on its official website. Meanwhile, the Malawi Foreign and Labour Ministries, while stressing that there is no formal “labour export agreement” with Russia, allow recruitment through “unofficial means,” and Zambia, despite repeated inquiries, maintains a staunch silence regarding the fate of its youth.

A set of interviews with parents of recruits, additionally done for ZAM in Zimbabwe in cooperation with Deutsche Welle, confirmed that government officials there had also pushed recruitment for Alabuga. The news site Bloomberg reported similar recruitment by politically connected individuals in South Africa (see box).

Pictures on the website of Alabuga itself furthermore showed recruitment actions, including visits to Alabuga, by the Minister of Social Affairs in the DRC, as well as by ambassadors of Somalia, Angola, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Mali.

State officials promote, recruit and approve

Prickly yoghurt

On October 10, 2024, the Associated Press rocked the public sphere in many African and Western countries by publishing a report. In early August, the U.S. Embassy raised the alarm over the scale of the pollution, which may have released as much as 30 times more toxic sludge than initially reported. In an email sent to more than 400 U.S. Embassy staff and relevant Washington officials, the mission cited the contamination data and directed an immediate pullback from Kitwe and nearby districts. That said, young African women were working in a drone plant within the Alabuga Special Economic Zone, east of Moscow. It added that these recruits were assembling Iranian Shahed-136 attack drones to be used in Russia’s war in Ukraine and that they used chemicals to paint the drones.

According to the report, one worker told AP they were coating the drones with a caustic “substance with the consistency of yoghurt,” and that the chemicals “made her face feel like it was being pricked with tiny needles,” with “small holes” appearing on her cheeks, which itched.

“My God, I could scratch myself! I could never get tired of scratching myself,” AP quoted her as saying. A video shared with AP showed another woman wearing an Alabuga uniform with her face similarly affected.

“The company is all about making drones. I regret and curse the day I started making all those things,” the interviewed woman was quoted as saying. AP added that, according to experts, about 90% of the foreign women recruited via the Alabuga Start programme work on making drones, particularly the parts “that don’t require much skill.”

Tightly controlled

The experts quoted by AP are connected to the Washington, US-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS). In a separate report, ISIS “The company is all about making drones. I regret and curse the day I started making all those things,” the interviewed woman was quoted as saying. AP added that, according to experts, about 90% of the foreign women recruited via the Alabuga Start programme work on making drones, particularly the parts “that don’t require much skill.” revealed that “in some leaked (Alabuga) documents from 2023, [some workers] were called ‘mulattoes’ (...) and that ‘the modules where they worked were labelled with an additional “M,” or “MM,” for “mulatto module,” which were “the most technologically simple portions of airframe production.’” They also said the same Alabuga documents showed that “the participants of this program had fewer opportunities to advance from their assigned module.” In line with ZAM findings, both AP and ISIS found that women at the compound were monitored and that entry to facilities was strictly controlled.

More recently, ISIS has reported The email referred to 20 cm of dried tailings deposited across farms and the wider landscape, which have since become airborne, worsening the risk of inhaling toxic heavy metals. Water sampling showed contamination levels hundreds of times above safe limits. that “high-resolution satellite imagery of the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in mid-July 2025 reveals a vast expansion comprising hundreds of new residential buildings and a dozen new production facilities, including workshops, warehouses, and office buildings. (...) The hundreds of new residential buildings, when finished, could hold roughly 41,000 workers.”

Slick PR

A major tool for recruitment is a barrage of slick propaganda on Telegram, Facebook, and other social media channels, ranging from purported testimonials by enthusiastic participants, sometimes in school uniforms (there are no accounts of girls actually attending school in Alabuga), to orchestrated talks and interviews on YouTube. Positive “testimonials” have also been distributed through widely read news media in African countries, some of which have published them uncritically. A warning posted by a prospective recruit, who had shared international reports about drone manufacturing at Alabuga on the dedicated registration Telegram channel in Nigeria, was immediately removed.

“Sergeant Maya”

Perusing the Alabuga account on X, @sezalabuga, the ZAM team came across a tutorial—in the often-used form of a comic strip—which portrayed an unhappy African-looking girl who kept to herself and was only interested, as the thought bubble above her head said, in “sending money home.” Further in the story, she was admonished by a “Sergeant Maya,” who was in uniform and also black. “Sergeant Maya” gently coaxed the stubborn girl to embrace her new home, new family, and new friends.



Design by Sky Walker

We saved the Tweet, since “Sergeant Maya” was evidence that, despite Russia’s denials, Alabuga was a military-style environment. Secondly, the content pointed to a broader demographic goal we had also seen elsewhere: Russia appeared to be interested in attracting young women generally, and for more than just a two-year work arrangement. We discussed the findings at a team meeting.

And then the tweet disappeared. Under the URL, there was now only a message from X saying that “the page does not exist.” The Alabuga X account, instead, showed an altered comic strip, with the same girl as in the previous version, but this time she was only moody, no longer thinking about sending money home. In the new story, “Sergeant Maya” had been replaced by ‘HR’ (human resources) Maya, who was white and in civilian dress. The ending was the same: the girl shaped up and became great friends with her new Russian-based family.

Remarkably, the features that changed in the comic were the exact points previously highlighted by our editorial team in internal discussions.

Chillingly, the African governments in this story project generally appeared to actively support what has been called the “farming out” of their youth to jobs abroad, no matter how dodgy, and not only to Russia. The ZAM team notes that in Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda (and elsewhere in Africa), job agencies, often with government approval or with the active involvement of officials, have recruited young women into abusive domestic workers jobs in Gulf States, or youth generally into agricultural labour and security jobs in Israel.

Governments are ‘farming out’ the youth
Illustrating the attitude, Malawi Finance Minister Simplex Banda reported in February last year that the “labour export” to Israel from his country had already “generated US\$735,000” Chillingly, the African governments in this story project generally appeared to actively support what has been called the “farming out” of their youth to jobs abroad, no matter how dodgy, and not only to Russia. The ZAM team notes that in Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda (and elsewhere in Africa), job agencies, often with government approval or with the active involvement of officials, have recruited young women into abusive domestic workers jobs in Gulf States, or youth generally into agricultural labour and security jobs in Israel.. Less than a year later, his colleague, then Labour Minister, Vitumbiko Mumba, would admonish Malawian workers in Israel—who had complained about harsh conditions and abuse—for not fulfilling their job requirements, saying, inter alia, that they had “abandoned posts, engaged in unauthorised vending and seeking asylum as gays,” and that this was causing Malawi to be “less marketable to the Israeli government”

Save for Botswana, where the Interpol office was recently reported as stating it was looking into Alabuga recruitment in the country We saved the Tweet, since “Sergeant Maya” -

was evidence that, despite Russia’s denials, Alabuga was a military-style environment. Secondly, the content pointed to a broader demographic goal we had also seen elsewhere: Russia appeared to be interested in attracting young women generally, and for more than just a two-year work arrangement. We discussed the findings at a team meeting., and South Africa, which promised to look into the matter (see below), none of the governments in this investigation have publicly expressed concern about young citizens now living at a drone manufacturing site; not even after the compound was targeted by Ukrainian drone attacks on 2 April 2024 and again in April and May 2025. None of the governments in the seven countries responded to letters asking to facilitate contact with the recruits or whether they were concerned for their safety.

Trafficking station

While driving away their own youth, some of the governments in this investigation have also engaged in deals with the West to accommodate unwanted migrants from elsewhere, even Palestinians chased from Gaza. Ugandan sources told the team that the country is turning into a trafficking station, sending its own young adults abroad while offering itself to the US as a ‘dumping ground’ for unwanted humans from there.

South Africa

Late in August, a Bloomberg investigation in South Africa While driving away their own youth, some of the governments in this investigation have also engaged in deals with the West to accommodate unwanted migrants from elsewhere, even Palestinians chased from Gaza. Ugandan sources told the team that the country is turning into a trafficking station, sending its own young adults abroad while offering itself to the US as a ‘dumping ground’ for unwanted humans from there. revealed that the BRICS Women’s Business Alliance in that country—which says it operates under the mandate of the national Women’s Ministry—had signed an agreement to supply Russia with 5,600 workers next year, including to Alabuga. In a comment, the Women’s Ministry denied being “formally linked” to the recruiting organisation but said it “was aware” of it. The BRICS Student Alliance in the same country has also advertised Alabuga jobs, together with some high-profile influencers. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation said it was investigating but added that the “South African government is yet to find credible evidence that job offers in Russia are inconsistent with their stated purpose.”

The 947 radio channel reported that it had phoned office numbers in Alabuga for clarity, but not one of several calls was answered.

Boys go for US\$1000

The team also found that there was—at least for young male Alabuga recruits, three of whom were interviewed—an overlap between the Alabuga project and the frontlines of the war in Ukraine. Two young men from Burundi, who had initially been put to work in the drone factory, found themselves coerced and obliged to go to war.

A Ugandan politician who acted as a recruiter said that “boys,” wherever they were in Russia, were at great risk of being recruited into the war because “the posters are everywhere,” and that was why Uganda preferred “that they take the girls.”

African students in other parts of Russia reported having received offers to find compatriots to enlist in the Russian army, with one sending a screenshot showing “US\$1000 per Malawian.” Military recruits from a wide range of African countries have been identified in online reports and photographs wearing Russian uniforms.

Women were encouraged to establish relationships

Women were encouraged to establish relationships
Regarding the young women—which perhaps explains the mysterious age limit of 22—the team was able to confirm reports, including from Alabuga PR itself African students in other parts of Russia reported having received offers to find compatriots to enlist in the Russian army, with one sending a screenshot showing “US\$1000 per Malawian.” Military recruits from a wide range of African countries have been identified in online reports and photographs wearing Russian uniforms., that girls were encouraged to establish “love” relationships with fellow workers at Alabuga and in Russia generally. One Alabuga recruit from Burundi told the team that “several girls got pregnant” during his time working there.

Savings under “sanctions”

The ZAM team interviewed one recruit who is presently residing in a dorm room at Alabuga. She said that the site was “very large, with many industries” and that her colleagues worked there in various jobs, not only on drones. However, she also said that the workers were subject to heavy security, were not allowed to wander freely, and had ID cards that restricted them to limited areas. There was a very “strict workplace culture” that many were “unable to cope” with. “A lot of them have gone back,” she said, adding that she herself wanted to return after fulfilling her two-year term but was concerned she might not be able to bring back her savings “because of sanctions.”

(1) BRICS is the alliance comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In a series of seven stories, ZAM portrays the Alabuga schemes’ manifestations in the Great Lakes region (focusing on Burundi and Rwanda), Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Malawi, and Cameroon.

This article was first published by ZAM Magazine

“There is a new mining order that is coming. Embrace it, but what is illegal, do not tolerate it,” says minister.

By Charles Mafa and Beverly Subeti

- Illegal mining is rife at Sensele Mine in Zambia.
- Many lives have been claimed. For example, over 30 people died in a mudslide in December 2023.
- Sensele Enterprises and Zambia’s government appear to lay the blame for the continuation of illegal mining at each other’s doors.
- Questions have been raised about the relationship between Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industries Chipoka Mulenga and a businessperson who is known as “Laila”, and the latter’s role in the mine.

The copper-ore-rich pits of Sensele Mine are routinely entered by informal miners, including children, who risk death for a pittance. The fatal accidents that follow raise questions about lax security at the mine and whether powerful figures are ignoring the danger while quietly profiting from it.

Chipoka Mulenga, the Member of Parliament representing the Chingola Central constituency where Sensele Mine is located, is also Zambia’s Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industries.

Questions have been raised about Mulenga, as well as a businesswoman known as Laila, and their involvement in Sensele.

Mulenga visited the mine on 21 June following threats by young men to riot unless access to the mine was reinstated. The mine has been officially closed since December 2023, after a mudslide, probably caused by informal mining, claimed 30 lives.

Video footage from Mulenga’s visit, posted on Facebook on 21 June but later deleted, shows the minister accompanied by Laila.

On the day he visited Sensele, Mulenga received a lawyer’s letter from Muya & Company, a firm representing Sensele Enterprises. The letter accuses the minister of ignoring a 13 May 2025 High Court order preventing anyone from entering the mining site, pending a hearing.

The letter also accuses Mulenga of handing the mine over to illegal miners. “As is now publicly documented via widely circulated video recordings, you personally [Mulenga] presided over this unlawful handover.”

It continues: “We are further instructed that you appointed one ‘Laila’ and a Chinese company as the ‘contractors’ to represent the interests of the illegal miners’ actions which appear to serve your personal interests and not any lawful regulatory or public policy function.”

The government issued a statement on 23 June, denying that it had authorised illegal mining at Sensele.

Yet illegal mining continues at the mine, and it appears the mining company and the government each hold the other responsible for the mine’s security, and consequently, the failure to stop illegal mining.

BLOOD ON THE COPPER: The Government Minister, the Mysterious Businesswoman & illegal Mining (Part II)

For example, in our previous article, we reported that Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development Permanent Secretary Hapenga Kabeta said security at any private mine lies with the licence holder, not the ministry. “Sensele [Mine] is licenced to a private individual, and according to the law, it is that individual’s responsibility to secure the area,” he said.

Minister of Mines and Minerals Development Paul Kabuswe said Sensele Mine remains a private operation.

In an interview at his home in Lusaka’s Longacres, Minister Mulenga said he visited the mine on 21 June in his capacity as an MP visiting his constituents as he regularly does. Mulenga, who credits the current government for exposing the problem of illegal mining, stressed that on that day, he visited to encourage the young men on the mine to work safely with no child labour.

When asked about Laila, he stressed that he was not accompanied to the meeting by anyone else. He pointed out that, as the parliamentary representative for the area, he did have to meet companies and business people to discuss ways they could support development projects.

Mulenga said that the government wanted to end illicit mining and bring about a way of working where “all those boys can be absorbed into a structured way of working provided with equipment and resources that are there”.

“There is a new mining order that is coming. Embrace it, but what is illegal, do not tolerate it,” said Mulenga.



We approached Laila for comment on her involvement at the mine (we do not know if this is her real name or how it is spelt). She told us she was there to provide humanitarian assistance, support she claimed to routinely offer. However, she later said that her lawyer would respond on her behalf.

The Lusaka-based law firm Shepande & Company, representing Laila, then contacted us and requested a written inquiry. We responded, asking for details on the registered organisation through which Laila provides humanitarian assistance.

We asked, among other things, for clarification on whether Laila is involved in the purchase or trade of copper ore from illegal mining operations at Sensele Mine or elsewhere in Zambia. We also asked that she address or refute allegations that she pays commissions to political figures or government officials to facilitate mining and mineral trading activities.

In a written response, Shepande & Company stated that they were instructed to reiterate their client’s sentiments expressed in our telephone conversation of 6 August.

The firm warned that it would “commence legal proceedings for libel should the intended article contain any injurious and nonfactual information and or allegations against our client”.

While the ruling United Party for National Development condemns illegal mining, Zambia’s Financial Intelligence Centre’s 2024 Trends Report confirms that it is not only a thriving industry, it is enabled by corruption and linked to international criminal networks.

The FIC uncovered a K1 billion (approximately US\$5 million) mineral smuggling syndicate operating between 2022 and 2024. The scheme involved Zambian citizens and East African nationals who smuggled foreign cash into Zambia to buy illegal copper, gold, and gemstones, which were then smuggled out without paying taxes or passing through customs.

In 2024 alone, the FIC flagged over US\$3.5 billion in suspected illicit financial flows, mainly linked to mineral trade and trade misinvoicing. Hotspots identified include Kasempa, Mufulira, Kitwe, and Chingola, where minerals flowed out and untaxed foreign currency came in through bank accounts and mobile wallets, often registered under Zambian proxies. The FIC also found 131 companies or individuals involved, including over 400 legal entities and over 800 people—many of them foreign nationals or their proxies.

The crowned eagle is one of those magnificent birds that should be on everyone's list of must-see in a lifetime.

It is a very large eagle clearly distinguished by the rufous under-wing coverts, and strongly barred white and black outer wings and tail. It has a speckled rufous, black and white breast and a crest on its head which is raised when it is perched by the wind or by excitement. The female is almost a third heavier than the male and the difference in size is very obvious when seen together.

It occurs throughout south-eastern Africa up to Ethiopia and across to West Africa. However, it is not found in the dense tropical forests of the Congo Basin. This is an eagle of the thick riverine forest and is found along the Kafue and Luangwa Rivers as well as in Lower Zambezi.

Its diet, like the leopard, consists of mainly small mammals, which it has to surprise to make a kill. It will sit inconspicuously for hours waiting on a perch in a leafy tree for an animal to pass beneath. It will then drop down with its extremely powerful feet and claws, which it uses to paralyse and kill its prey. Then it will take the prey up in a tree to feast on. If the prey is too large to carry, it will dismember it and carry it up the tree piece by piece, out of the reach of other predators.

The Crowned Eagle: The Leopard of the Skies

On the menu are monkeys, baboons, small antelopes, dassies, game birds and monitor lizards. However, there was a report — investigated by Bob Stjernstedt and found to be true — that a small child was attacked on the way to school. This was near Mpansha Mission in Chongwe District. The crowned eagle dropped on to the 20kg seven-year-old boy, lacerating his head and back quite badly. Fortunately, a woman was walking behind with a hoe and she set on the eagle and managed to kill it to save the child.



Crowned eagles breed mainly in August, September and October in Zambia. The nest is a huge pile of sticks usually in the fork of a tall tree. Both parents help with the construction of a new nest, or repairing an older nest. Sometimes the female stays in situ while the male flies back and forth with material which she places in position. Two eggs are laid and incubation is around seven weeks. However, only one chick survives. The female looks after the hatchlings initially and later both parents share bringing food to the chick. The chick is not ready to fly until it is nearly four months old. It stays with his parents until it is nearly a year old, so generally crowned eagles are only able to breed every two years.

This story was first published in the September 2011 edition of the Bulletin and Record magazine.

MAKANDAY

Editors

Charles Mafa

John Mukela

Layout & Design

Bwalya Chibwe

Investigators

Ennety Munshya

Linda Soko

Office Assistant

Joanna Ndabala

Contact(s)

0963507661

editor@makanday.org

At the launch of the report in Lusaka on September 2, 2025, attended by political party leaders, representatives, and civil society, the mood in the room revealed an uncomfortable truth: politicians are unwilling to reform because transparency threatens their access to unregulated resources. The old ways are convenient, profitable, and deeply entrenched.

But democracy cannot thrive on secrecy. If leaders continue to cling to the shadows, then elections will remain compromised by hidden money, foreign influence, and illicit financing.

Change is never comfortable. Yes, enforcing financial transparency will disrupt entrenched networks of power. Yes, it may reduce access to easy money. But that is precisely why it is necessary.

Zambia urgently needs a law to regulate political party financing. Such a law must:

- Mandate disclosure of all donations above a set threshold.
- Prohibit anonymous and foreign donations.
- Require audited financial reports published for public scrutiny.
- Introduce public funding mechanisms that level the playing field and reduce dependence on shadow money.

The Constitution demands it. International treaties require it. Citizens deserve it.

Until Zambia fixes its broken system of political party financing, our democracy will remain hostage to money. And when money rules, it is not the people who govern—but those who can afford to buy power.

When Money Rules, It is Not The People Who Govern

A democracy is only as strong as the integrity of its elections. Yet in Zambia, political parties operate in the shadows when it comes to money—the lifeblood of politics. A new study by Transparency International Zambia (TIZ), supported by BBC Media Action through the Deepening Democracy Facility, has ripped the lid off the country's murky system of political party financing. What it reveals should alarm every citizen who cares about the health of our democracy.

Despite clear provisions in the Constitution under Article 60, Zambia still has no law regulating how parties are funded. In practice, this has left parties free to raise money without scrutiny, accountability, or disclosure. And the results are damning.

Between March and May 2025, TIZ surveyed 40 political parties. Out of the 28 that responded, 57% contested the 2021 elections. Yet only 25% kept detailed financial records and used bank accounts.

Half admitted they never check the source of funds before accepting donations, while a staggering 64% said they take anonymous donations. Even worse, 75% acknowledged receiving money from foreign interests, including foreign governments, companies, and entities.

In short, Zambia's political parties are wide open to capture—by shadow financiers, foreign actors, and vested interests. Instead of being accountable to citizens, our politicians risk becoming beholden to those who bankroll their campaigns.

This is not a small governance problem. It is a direct threat to our democracy.

Zambia is not operating in a vacuum. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), under Article 7.3, and the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUPCC), both oblige member states to regulate and ensure -

transparency in political party and campaign financing. Other African countries—though not perfect—have taken steps to meet this obligation.

- South Africa requires disclosure of large donations and funds parties through a proportional public fund.
- Kenya allocates at least 0.3% of national revenue to parties through the Political Parties Fund.
- Uganda provides public financing to parties in parliament (though complaints of bias remain).
- Nigeria and Ghana, where private money dominates, provide stark warnings about corporate capture of politics.

Zambia, however, lags behind. Our leaders continue to hide behind constitutional rhetoric while refusing to pass the enabling law that would operationalize Article 60.

Why the resistance?

► The Hidden Reality of Zambia’s Alabuga Recruits

By Charles Mafa

Late last year, the world was alerted to the disturbing news that Russia was recruiting hundreds of young African women, aged 18–22, to manufacture drones in a military-industrial compound called Alabuga, 1,000 kilometers east of Moscow. The reports also said that the recruits—from at least 15 African countries—were promised good salaries and skills training, but that once there, they were often trapped, facing tax deductions, dangerous working conditions, strict surveillance, and difficulties in returning home.

In the past six months, a ZAM team in seven African countries investigated the Russian recruitment exercise—and why so many young Africans grab the chance to go, sometimes even after having been warned. This Zambia chapter confirms that, once there, it is almost impossible for Alabuga recruits to freely contact home, or even to speak out publicly at all.

When we finally get to speak to a young African woman in Alabuga, the contrast with the cheerful PR shown to the Zambian public could not be greater. Brochures circulated through various media, events hosted by Russian-linked associations in the capital, and even talk shows on private TV have so far featured only smiling girls in school-like uniforms, accompanied by testimonials praising the wonderful opportunities the programme has given them. But speaking with Tabitha* casts a very different light on what the recruits are experiencing there.

It has taken us more than seven months of trying to finally make contact with an “Alabuga girl”. Getting through to a dormitory (advertised as ‘cosy’ in the supposedly ‘loving’ Alabuga environment), we find one, among seven young women of different nationalities, willing to speak to us about her experiences. From the way she speaks, she is clearly from southern Africa.

Happiness is not the impression we get

But happiness is not the impression we at MakanDay, the Lusaka-based journalism centre I work for, get from Tabitha. Even though she is apparently interested in informing us, she has repeatedly postponed our call and has nearly withdrawn altogether, answering us in the end only to voice her second thoughts. She then relents.

“Advanced materials”

Among the first things she says is that, even after close to a year, she still does not fully understand the Alabuga programme or what happens inside the compound. Among the industrial operations she says she has observed are the manufacture of automotive, construction, and what she calls “advanced materials”. “I can’t understand this company (the Alabuga Start Programme in the Special Economic Zone) and why so many people from around the world are here. Maybe they want to attract investors or something,” she says.

Asked about the military drones that are reportedly produced at her workplace, she says that she “can’t know everything that goes on here. Because this is not just one place, it is a massive piece of land with many industries.”

She adds that even her identification card restricts her movements within the zone, and then asks for details of the work that she does to be withheld for fear of being identified.

Tax deductions

She has been there for the work opportunity and to save money for her family and her own future. “The salary is definitely good compared to the salaries back home,” she continues. “Of course, they didn’t mention in their adverts that during the first six months of the programme, we would face a 30 percent tax deduction from our salaries.” She says she only discovered the deduction after arriving in Russia, and she still does not know what the tax is for.

There have also been other disappointments. “Some of us here are unable to cope with the workload and the strict workplace culture,” she says, refusing to be drawn into expanding on what that means, but adding that many young people “have left the programme.” “You find people just go back. A lot have gone back.”

“People just go back”

Not convinced by much-distributed Alabuga material, – inter alia in the form of videos and comic strips – exhorting young women to learn Russian, embrace the culture, find friends, love and perhaps even a new home in Russia, Tabitha is adamant that she herself will return home after the programme next year. She dreams of living in her home country again and investing her savings there. However, she has become aware that it may be difficult to transfer the saved funds out of Russia.

“Because of sanctions,” she says, though this is likely only part of the problem: Russia has itself also introduced certain bans on foreigners trying to send money home.

When asked to introduce us to the other girls on the programme, or even her family at home, she agrees but cautions that “many are unwilling to talk” because of the “negative reports that have been written” about Alabuga in the international press. She explains that two girls in her dormitory at Alabuga are actively assisting in Russia’s recruitment drive, giving online talks to encourage more girls to sign up.

We wait for Tabitha to communicate again, to give us more contacts, but she never does.

The recruitment drive

MakanDay started its quest to discover what really goes on in Alabuga after international reports were published in October last year, showing that young African women looking for opportunities abroad were offered “fellowships” in the programme, only to end up in a manufacturing facility producing Iranian Shahed drones for use in the war against Ukraine.

Small fingers

Why Alabuga wants only very young women—applications are reserved for those between 18 and 22 years of age—has been explained with theories ranging from “typically female precision” and “small fingers” to “they are easier to dominate.”

But some reports and clips openly advertised “love” and “finding a wealthy husband” at Alabuga, such as here [MakanDay started its quest to discover what really goes on in Alabuga after international reports were published in October last year, showing that young African women looking for opportunities abroad were offered “fellowships” in the programme, only to end up in a manufacturing facility producing Iranian Shahed drones for use in the war against Ukraine.](#) indicating a broader demographic goal. The Great Lakes chapter in this transnational investigation quotes a male Alabuga participant saying that “several girls got pregnant” during his stay there.



Design by Sky Walker

Satellite photos

Among our first efforts had been to try and picture what the Alabuga facility comprised. Contrary to the PR material that showed girls in school uniforms and talked of “study,” satellite photos did not appear to include an actual college or university.

“This looks like a factory, not a college,” said a Zambian professional who has studied in Russia, when MakanDay showed her pictures of the compound. “I have never seen a college in Russia that looks like this, and I have been to four cities there. They pride themselves in education, and a structure like this as a college would be shut down.”

Another former student in Russia questioned the salary figures after being shown an advert promising a 70,000 Rubles (US\$860) salary. “The average Russian salary is 30,000 Rubles per month. This just sounds too good to be true.”

“I have never seen a college in Russia that looks like this”

Government silence

We asked the Zambian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Immigration Department for comment, but despite repeated requests, neither institution responded. Among other questions, MakanDay sought to know what the government understood about the programme and whether any investigation had been conducted into the purpose for which Zambians were being recruited. Instead, the government remained silent, even as recruitment drives spread widely across social media.

Other southern African governments have kept similarly quiet. According to Tabitha, the only time she had become alerted that there might be something concerning about Alabuga was when immigration officials at her departure initially delayed clearing her papers, questioning both the programme and her young age, since she was only in her early twenties at the time. Eventually, however, she was allowed to travel.

Agricultural drones

After the official Zambian requests for comment failed, MakanDay sought a response from the Russian embassy in Lusaka but received no reply there either. Immediately afterward, however, the embassy began inviting other media—perhaps considered more friendly—to visit the Alabuga Start facility.

Those who participated in these all-expenses-paid PR trips would acknowledge later that their role was largely limited to interviewing selected recruits within the compound and being shown only a few aspects of the operations. One, when asked whether they had toured any facility producing military drones, responded: “The only drone manufacturing plant we visited was one that (according to his guides) produces agricultural drones for irrigation.

Asking the Zambia–Russia Graduates Cultural Association ZAMRUS for information also proved futile. While director Patricia Kalinga has actively promoted the programme publicly, published its material on ZAMRUS social media, and accompanied journalists on PR trips to Russia, she never responded to our questions. The Russia House in Lusaka, which has also engaged in promotional activities for Alabuga, only informed us that MakanDay’s query to the Russian embassy had been passed on to it. An official at the House promised in that message to respond to our questions but never did.

A Russia House official promised to respond but never did

Anti-human-trafficking

A last development before our deadline was a confirmation from a source within the Department of Anti-Human Trafficking that the unit had been asked to look into the Alabuga programme at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Immigration Department. Talking to the source, it became clear that the request had come to the department shortly after MakanDay had approached the Ministry for comment.

The source added that the department intends to interview someone from ZAMRUS, but that had not yet happened “because of a busy schedule.”

A Zambian has already died on Russia’s frontlines While high unemployment and lack of prospects in Zambia are known to cause many of its young people to seek opportunities abroad, it remains a mystery why the Zambian authorities are not taking a more proactive role in guarding the safety and prospects of its youth at Alabuga, and more generally in Russia. This is all the more concerning because a Zambian has already died on Russia’s frontlines. 23-year-old Zambian student Lemekhani Nyirenda, together with 37-year-old Tanzanian Nemes Tarimom had both been imprisoned in Russia on dubious drug charges, but were offered freedom in exchange for joining the Kremlin-funded Wagner Group. The deal resulted in their deaths on the Ukrainian battlefield.

A letter asking the Zambian embassy in Moscow whether it was ensuring the safety of Zambian girls at Alabuga was acknowledged but ultimately left unanswered.

This article was first published by ZAM Magazine

Looking for Oceanne

Late last year, the world was alerted to the disturbing news that Russia was recruiting hundreds of young African women, aged 18–22, to manufacture drones in a military-industrial compound 1,000 km east of Moscow called Alabuga. The reports also said that the recruits—from at least 15 African countries—were promised good salaries and skills training, but that, once there, they were often trapped, facing tax deductions, dangerous working conditions, strict surveillance, and difficulties in returning home.

In the past six months, a ZAM team in seven African countries investigated the Russian recruitment exercise—and why so many young Africans grab the chance to go, sometimes even after being warned. The Cameroon chapter of this transnational investigation portrays a recruiter who says his efforts are in line with a United Nations drive for the “financial empowerment of girls.”

“Please, where can I register? I want to fight for both Ukraine and Russia,” says a Facebook post by Gertrude Njong from April this year. A post from the same period, ostensibly by a young man named Tamnjong Desmond Platini, agrees: “How do they do it? I want to join the list. Better I should waste in a foreign land fighting than die of hunger in Cameroon.” A third account, called ‘Cameroon legit info line,’ says, “Better to die in Russia or Ukraine than to die (here) and perish,” and gets 31 likes, several of which are laughing emojis.

This is Facebook, of course. In real life, many Cameroonians may think twice before actually joining a war in a cold, foreign country. According to Africa Report, however, several thousand have in fact taken precisely this step.

Many individuals from this group have left for Russia to take up jobs and fellowships in military-adjacent fields, such as security, logistics, IT, or the Alabuga programme.

A Russian visa is very easy to get

The primary motive for this trek to Russia, as it—perhaps unsurprisingly—emerges from my interviews, is the desperation among our youth about the future in Cameroon itself. Here, a now 92-year-old autocrat, President Paul Biya, rules over a regime that ranks 140th on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions list, even lower than Mali, Liberia, and Gabon. Biya has recently nominated himself again for the elections in October this year, and Cameroon’s Constitutional Council has excluded the principal opposition leader from even participating in these elections.

This being the case, many among the country’s young have come to believe that oppression, poverty, and a glaring absence of ways to develop a meaningful existence for oneself may be eternal, and that protesting is futile. So, they get out, whether on boats or with an easy—very, very easy to get, especially when compared to a visa for anywhere else—Russian visa.

“Opportunity of a lifetime”

Audrey (20) and Ebane (18), acquaintances of mine, are considering the opportunity offered to them by the military-linked Alabuga Start Programme. It sounds appealing, they say, because it is not actually about fighting in the war, it is for girls, and you get money to send home. Audrey tells me she found this “opportunity of a lifetime” through an Alabuga Start advert on Facebook and has been calling the number of the representative listed on the platform to learn more about enlisting. “My family struggles to make ends meet. My mom works part-time, but our income barely covers our expenses,” she says. “I don’t see much hope here. This programme feels like my best chance at a better future.” Her friend, 18-year-old Ebane, is excited by the all-expenses-paid promises.



“This is a great opportunity to go abroad and start a new life. Things are difficult here.”

When I tell them about the investigation that I am part of, and the international reports that have shown some of the promises may be too good to be true, they are disappointed. I leave them immersed in doubt.

When I tell them about the investigation that I am part of, and the international reports that have shown some of the promises may be too good to be true, they are disappointed. I leave them immersed in doubt.

In the following days and weeks, I tried to find Cameroonians in Alabuga. One particular online profile, of a beautiful young lady called Oceanne Stecy, had attracted my attention. Maybe I could find her? She seemed accomplished and self-assured in the YouTube video I, along with many other Cameroonians, had seen, walking along what seemed like well-kept lawns and white buildings in a place that, judging by the clothing, seemed cold.

Alabuga? Was she really there? An editor flashed questions on the screen: What is your name? How did you hear about Alabuga? How do you like it here? She confidently answered, smiling throughout, repeating that she was happy and well cared for, and inviting fellow young women from Cameroon to also join the moving train to this Special Economic Zone in Russia.

Trying to contact Oceanne, however, had been unsuccessful. Name searches on the internet had only turned up profiles with the same unusual name appearing on job listings as au pairs in Abidjan, Germany, and elsewhere in Russia. Did Oceanne even exist? Oceanne’s name also popped up on listings of au pairs Together with a friend of mine who works for a telemarketing company, we phone the number of the Alabuga representative in Cameroon: Michel Ateba, who, according to photos on his LinkedIn profile, is a tall, good-looking man in classy but modest dress. My friend pretends that she wants to register, but tells him she is concerned about the negative reports we have read. He assures us warmly that all of that is not true and is merely Western propaganda. He repeats that we’ll receive good salaries, free housing, and skills training, and won’t have to worry about anything. His company, Enangue Holdings, even offers passport fee assistance for 40 recruits from poor backgrounds. The passport fee in Cameroon is about US\$200.

Partnering with Russian taxis

Enangue Holdings can certainly afford some assistance with our travel perils, it seems, based on research into its background. He is a director of many companies and holds government contracts for several. In one photo, he is dressed in a shirt made from the ruling party’s typical fabric and design.

Ateba has been actively promoting Russian-Cameroon business and trade relations for about nine years and has also entered a partnership with and obtained an operations license for Russian taxi company Yango in the lucrative taxi business in Cameroon. He has recently been named a member of the Cameroon Business Council, overseeing all of Cameroon’s trade with Russia.

“This is about financial empowerment of the girl child”

“I don’t want to talk anymore with these journalists who just put the Western lies to me,” he explains when I phone him directly, identifying myself as a journalist. Then he agrees to talk to me, since he says I might really want to listen.

Emphasising that his Alabuga recruitment efforts are “backed by the Cameroonian Ministry of Women Empowerment and the Family” (abbreviated MINPROFF), he wants me to understand that this is all about the “financial empowerment of the girl child,” which is “in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.” He then adds that he is also “actively engaged” with the country’s foreign affairs ministry, MINREX (Ministry of External Relations), to promote Alabuga. He has personally been to the compound, he says, and assures me that those who are in Alabuga are safe and doing well. “There are thirteen (from Cameroon) there now, but we are expected to send a hundred more this year.” Photos on Enangue Holdings’ Facebook page show Ateba himself at Alabuga, smiling and surrounded by young women.

“We’ll send a hundred more this year”

Vehement denial

I ask why Alabuga is only for such young women, with an age limit of 22, but don’t get a straight answer. “They may consider males in the future, but for now it’s just girls,” he says. When I then raise some of the issues reported by international media, such as exploitation and maltreatment, Ateba once again vehemently denies them. “Who told you that? This is just propaganda fueled by the West against Russia. Alabuga is not about the war in Ukraine. There are many factories there, and over a thousand girls from various nations, including Asians. Why is there a focus on Africa in the international reports? The case is simply that Western countries have outlived their opportunities for Africans, and they don’t want Russia to take the lead.” Sternly: “It’s all a smear campaign. We are following up on that.”

Following up, how, I ask. “We are assembling a record of all these websites. And we’ll take some journalists and government officials to Alabuga so they can see for themselves. Maybe later this year or next year. The partners (in Russia) are working on that.” He adds that in the meantime, "you either believe that what we are telling you is true, or you believe what people are saying on the internet. These girls are fine there.”

“It’s all a smear campaign”

I ask if I can speak with one of them, just to make sure that they are indeed fine, and mention Oceanne Stecy. Maybe I can talk to her? But Ateba says he cannot facilitate contact with her, or any other Cameroonian in Alabuga, or their families in Cameroon at the time. “My Russian partners have not given me approval to connect any girls for an interview for the moment,” he adds. “If the partners approve such an interview, I will let you know.”

He hasn't come back to me.

When I check his Linkedin profile again, I find that he has marketed recruitment for Alabuga even as a solution to illegal migration away from Cameroon or Africa. The programme is “addressing one of the biggest headaches we’ve got in Africa today – illegal immigration”, he writes, implying that marshalling youth through his Russian channel will help stop them departing through other means. Unanswered calls

Having failed in my search for Oceanne, I ask a contact at MINREX if they really are partnering with Michel Ateba and Enangue Holdings in promoting Alabuga recruitment. Speaking anonymously, my source says he has not heard of that and has been told that Cameroon “is working towards discouraging such ventures,” because “in some cases Cameroonians had to be repatriated from countries where they were subjected to poor working conditions.” However, when I ask more questions about Alabuga, my source becomes frightened and tells me to “get approval from the Ministry of Communication and follow the regulated procedures to interview government sources,” an avenue that, as every journalist in Cameroon knows, will be difficult.

Sadly, I have no contacts at MINPROFF; the website for the department does not even load, which is not an exceptional occurrence in Cameroon. Phone calls to officials whose numbers I managed to get later at both ministries are left unanswered.

This is, again, not surprising. Citizens in this country are accustomed to their government not responding to individual or civil society concerns, and media queries are regularly left unanswered— unless the reporter is friendly with a politician, who then often uses the reporter as a public relations agent for him or herself.

The silence is agony for many families

The silence is agony for many families, especially those whose children left for Russia’s military service. Cameroonian channel Equinox TV recently featured the family of Eric Donald Demlabing, a former student at the University of Dschang’s Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in the West region, who travelled to Russia in October 2024. It was Demlabing’s second time, as he had previously returned after completing his first stint of military service. According to his father, interviewed by Equinox, his son’s decision to go back was motivated by an offer of 2 million CFA francs (just over €3,500).

The father also told Equinox that the last time he heard from his son was in February 2025, when Demlabing sent videos to friends from the frontlines describing going two weeks without water — there was only tea for drinking — and developing rashes. The family had no contact with him since. In one of the videos from the Ukraine front, they came across later, the father said, a voice was saying: “It wasn’t easy, bro... many people died between February and now, it’s not easy here, bro... we don’t have a choice.”

Service secret de la résistance

In desperate attempts to find out what is happening amid silence from the authorities, Cameroonians are flocking to social media in search of information about those who have left for Russia. A Facebook whistleblower account run by a diaspora-based individual called Nzui Manto, which has 638,000 followers, has become the go-to portal for families missing a loved one. Manto, whose email address is ‘servicesecretdelaresistance’ and who is rumoured to be a “revolutionary,” appears to have strong sources, particularly regarding the Russian front in Ukraine; even Africa Defence Magazine quotes him on his estimate that 65 Cameroonian soldiers have died there so far.

Often, when families report that they haven’t seen their fathers, children, nephews, or nieces for a while, ‘Nzui Manto’ promises to investigate and report back. In this way, he has informed scores of Cameroonian families that their loved ones have died, giving the places, dates, and circumstances that led to their demise.

Responses like “Oh no, this was my uncle” or “I worked with him when I was teaching” indicate that the families in question lend credibility to Manto’s reports.

“Oh no, this was my uncle”

Memorial services have been organised following the Facebook portal’s feedback, amid not a peep from either Cameroonian or Russian authorities. The last death report on Nzui Manto’s Facebook page is dated 24 August.

Career prospects

But not all who go die; it is an unfortunate truth that career prospects, even for soldiers, may in some cases still be better in Russia than in Cameroon, where soldiers are dying in wars with Boko Haram in the north and armed separatists in the English-speaking regions. When I come across a Cameroonian contact who is now an officer in Russia’s military intelligence, he says that “many simply travel on a tourist visa, then see application forms to join the army, all posted at major places like the tram station. Then, if they want to, they go there and enlist themselves.”

He does not want to talk about himself or how he ended up collecting intelligence on “enemy” Ukraine, but continues: “This is how it happens generally: the recruiters (then) leave you a text message—in French if you don’t understand Russian. This message contains directions on how you get to your training camp. Once you get there, they train you for two to three months, and after that, you are dispatched to fight against Ukraine.” Though cautious throughout our conversation, my contact doesn’t seem too eager to return to Cameroon.

Mixed messages

In March this year, the Cameroonian Ministry of Defence announced a crackdown on soldiers deserting the army to fight in Russia. In the press release, Minister Delegate at the Presidency in charge of Defence, Joseph Beti Assomo, urged all heads of the country’s defence and security forces to “please urgently take all appropriate measures to tighten control over personnel within your ranks” in this regard.

Two months later, however, on 26 May—at a celebration of Africa Day at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow—Cameroonian ambassador to Russia Mahamat Paba Salé still celebrated how “Russia contributes to the training of African personnel” and that Cameroon “owed a great deal” to Russia “in the sphere of security and the military.” In a report for the Russian site afrinz.ru, which says it is “a Russian news agency about events on the African continent” with the “goal to mutually expand the knowledge of Russians and Africans about each other,” he was further quoted as saying that Russia was now Cameroon’s “main partner outside the continent” and that “even in the most remote villages in Africa, you can see children waving the flags of the Russian Federation.”

According to the report, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said during his speech at the same reception that Russia “would continue to assist African countries in strengthening their defence capabilities and countering terrorism.”

A letter sent by ZAM, asking Ambassador Mahamat Paba Salé—who is, at 74, among the younger generation of Cameroon’s state representatives—for comment on Cameroonian deaths and disappearances in Russia, was left unanswered.

Migrant Battalion | Great Lakes

Samuel Baker Byansi

Caught in the snow

Late last year, the world was alerted to the disturbing news that Russia was recruiting hundreds of young African women, aged 18–22, to go and manufacture drones in a military-industrial compound a thousand km east of Moscow called Alabuga. The reports also stated that the recruits—from at least fifteen African countries—were promised good salaries and skills training but, once there, were often trapped, facing tax deductions, dangerous working conditions, strict surveillance, and difficulties in returning home.

In the past six months, a ZAM team in seven African countries investigated the Russian recruitment exercise—and why so many young Africans take the opportunity, sometimes even after being warned. This Great Lakes chapter shows that not only women but also young men are recruited to Alabuga, where they face pressure to join the army and fight at the front. It also shows that their own governments offer little help and that returnees experience shame and trauma.



When 19-year-old Silas* left his family home in Sampeke, rural Burundi, in early 2023, he believed he was embarking on the opportunity of a lifetime. Russian recruiters had promised him vocational training, steady employment, and a chance to send money home through the prestigious Alabuga Start programme. He had seen videos of modern factories, comfortable dormitories, and smiling African workers. “What they didn’t show us were the uniforms waiting for us,” he says, telling how, eighteen months later, he was dodging Ukrainian artillery fire in a frozen trench outside Bakhmut.

Silas’s journey from the Alabuga drone factory to the battlefield illustrates how the programme connects to the military, especially for men. After six months assembling drone components, he and several other East Africans were transferred to a military training facility in Rostov-on-Don. “They said it was the next phase of our vocational training, security work,” Silas recalls. “By then, we understood what was really happening, but the contracts were clear: desertion meant prison or worse.”

“People I trained with were lying dead”

The training was brief and brutal. Within weeks, Silas found himself in eastern Ukraine, part of a unit that included men from Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco, and other African nations. Many of these recruits did not volunteer at all, he says; they were sent to the front lines through deceit and coercion. “The mortality rate was horrific,” Silas continues. “They used us in human wave attacks, treating men as cannon fodder. So many of the people I trained with in Rostov-on-Don were lying dead on the ground in Donetsk.”

His escape came during a chaotic retreat when Ukrainian forces overran their position. Rather than regrouping with Russian forces, Silas surrendered to Ukrainian authorities, who classified him as a prisoner of war. He was subsequently included in a prisoner exchange at the Belarus border, a common location for such swaps. From Belarus, he made his way to the Polish border, where he applied for asylum and was granted temporary protection status as a conflict refugee. He later travelled within the Schengen zone to another EU country, where he is now awaiting formal asylum and refugee status.

Sophisticated recruitment

In Africa’s Great Lakes region, Russia is systematically exploiting economic desperation and educational aspirations to fuel its war in Ukraine. Searching social media and network contacts, ZAM found young people from Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania recruited into roles ranging from drone assembly to frontline combat. They had enlisted by responding to the “Academic Mobility Consortium” through a website called RAFU, the Russian-African Network University, which offers thousands of Russian-sponsored scholarships, or through the site of a group of Russian state universities, RACUS, which specifically lists Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Burundi as priority recruitment countries.

The recruitment websites look legitimate, featuring official Russian government endorsements. Recruitment also occurred at events at Russian cultural centres and embassies in Dar es Salaam and other major cities in the region, which regularly host education fairs promoting study opportunities. Additionally, so-called Russia Houses have been established in several regional capitals, ostensibly to promote language learning and cultural exchange.

Ten times their local salary seems worth any risk

On social media, TikTok videos featuring young African women at modern Russian facilities garner hundreds of thousands of views across East Africa. Facebook groups with names like Study in Russia – Great Lakes and African Success in Russia share success stories and application information. In Kenya, social media influencers target university students and recent graduates frustrated with limited employment opportunities, offering STEM graduates advanced training in engineering or technology. The recruitment networks extend into the Democratic Republic of Congo, where ongoing conflict has created large populations of displaced youth, and the Central African Republic, where Russian Wagner mercenaries have established a significant presence.

In Uganda, a security source confided that he has seen many young men go to Alabuga or the Russian front after having been promised “jobs as guards, security trainers, or military advisors. They work with local recruiting companies here, and most of the people go without knowing exactly what they are getting involved in.

For young men with limited prospects, earning ten times their local salary seems worth any risk.”

The disappearance of Libère Hatungimana

The family of Libère Hatungimana in Burundi only knows that he “went to study” in Russia in March 2025, but have had no news from him since May that year. The embassy of Burundi in Moscow has only told them they had no information, but that it was possible he had died.

Hatungimana, from Camizi Hill, Matongo commune, in Kayanza province, Burundi, was in his late twenties and had studied languages, for which he had a gift, at the University of Burundi. He was described as a calm young man who did not use alcohol or drugs and was friendly and loved by many. Before going to Russia, he worked in mobile money services in Bujumbura, Burundi’s capital.

Those we spoke with say Hatungimana said he was going to Russia on a student visa. However, a source at the Burundian embassy in Russia explained that universities in Russia start in September, and that it is not possible to begin studies in March. He also said that Libère was not on the list of students officially sent to Russia by Burundi’s government. “If you go for studies through another channel than officially, you likely end up in the military”, another source said.

One of Hatungimana’s close friends clarified that Hatungimana and around 10 other Burundians believed they had secured jobs in Russia. “But once they arrive, they discover that is not what they came for.” Another source said that “They tricked him into thinking he was going for a security job, but I know that he died on the battlefield; I cannot add more for my own safety. Other Burundians are fighting there as well, but they do not want to give information to Libère’s family, because they fear the intelligence services might trace them or their families.”

Another Burundian in Russia said that he “almost went there too, in March, that’s when they travel. About a hundred people went. I withdrew after realising it was military recruitment. Imagine going to fight in a place you don’t know, against people you don’t know, people already experienced with weapons, while you yourself have never been used to war.” He added that “the person who (contacted me and) convinced me not to go – I can no longer reach him. He had told me that when he arrived and found himself forced to be a soldier, he cried and panicked, but since he had no way back, he gave in and accepted going to the battlefield that was not his. Now, without doubt, he is dead.”

Modernity and opportunity

Analysis of social media activity shows coordinated efforts across platforms, with content specifically tailored to different regional audiences. “The content is professionally produced and psychologically sophisticated,” explains Burundian medical doctor Rodrigue Ndabashinze, who has worked with communities affected

by displacement and labour export, including individuals like Peter, who have returned from Russia. “(The promoters) understand exactly what appeals to young East Africans—modernity, opportunity, escape from limited prospects.”

But the returnees Ndabashinze has seen have been disappointed and damaged, he says. “The psychological impact may be even worse than the physical. These young people, who left home with dreams and hope, return traumatised, ashamed, and often unable to discuss their experiences with their families.” He adds that their silence is sometimes because they were forced to sign non-disclosure agreements as a condition of their release. “Others fear retaliation against family members if they speak publicly.”

Alabuga has become ground zero

The Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan has become ground zero for Russia’s most sophisticated recruitment operation in Africa. An estimated 800 women aged 18–22, but also young men like Silas, have been recruited under the pretences of a “work-study programme,” with participants earning a starting salary of US\$860 a month while, as the brochures say, “gaining valuable experience” in fields described as the services industry, IT, and logistics.

Also like Silas, recruit Peter* (23, from Burundi) discovered a different reality upon arrival. First, “they immediately confiscated our phones and passports.” The drone factory itself offered mainly very labour-intensive manual work, particularly in the manufacture of the airframe. Peter worked at the facility for six months before managing to return home. He describes the 12-hour shifts assembling components for Shahed drones as agonising: “The worst part wasn’t the work, it was realising that the things we were building were going to kill people—Ukrainian civilians, maybe children. But for that period, leaving wasn’t an option. I was trapped.” Reluctant to provide details of how he did it, Peter eventually made his way back home.

ZAM was able to verify both his and Silas’s accounts of events with families and acquaintances in Burundi, as well as through photos on their phones.

Stuck in Belarus

ZAM also established contact with a 22-year-old Rwandan who is currently stranded in Belarus after joining and completing the Alabuga programme. Speaking anonymously, he says he has made four attempts to cross into Poland, only to be arrested and returned each time. “His family in Belgium has tried everything—lawyers, diplomatic contacts, even hiring smugglers,” says a family friend, speaking from Brussels. “The Belarusian authorities won’t let him leave; they don’t care much about migrants.” Belarus has weaponised migrants’ presence in border zones by trapping people on its territory and pushing them toward the Polish border, creating pressure and instability for neighbouring countries. “But the Polish border guards won’t let him in either,” the relative continues. “He’s trapped in the midpoint, and we’re running out of options. Belarus is not a good place to be. He was once arrested, and we had to bribe the Belarusians for him to be released.”

“It’s like our children don’t matter”

The case highlights a broader pattern of abandonment by Russia after recruits decide they don’t want to continue on the path (often military) presented to them. Several sources confirmed that once recruits complete their “training” or labour assignments, many find themselves effectively stateless, unable or too ashamed to return home, and unwelcome in Russia without continued service.

Their own governments are not offering help, they say. A mother from Kanyosha, Bujumbura, in Burundi, whose 21-year-old son vanished four months after his arrival in Russia for purported engineering studies, expressed her frustration with official inaction: “We’ve approached everyone we think can help. Everyone expresses sympathy, but no one takes action. It’s like our children don’t matter.” Her son had travelled to Russia accompanied by a close friend, who disappeared at the same time, according to the mother. “We just hear unconfirmed reports that they might have been killed by a drone strike in Ukraine. There is no official confirmation or any information from Russian authorities, nor from officials here in Burundi,” she stated.

A troubling lack of care

Indifference, or the implicit cooperation of East African governments with the Russian agenda, permeates all the experiences. African governments have generally shown a troubling lack of care for their citizens, with some official documents even promoting the programme. In East Africa, Ugandan ambassador Moses Kizige publicly announced in 2022 that “this year Alabuga Polytechnic offered Uganda five scholarships and is open to enrolling more”; he was later seen visiting the compound. Kenyan ambassador Peter Mutuku Mathuki has publicly promoted the programme, saying he was “impressed” with Alabuga (1). No public statements warning of the military-adjacent nature of the Alabuga programme have been issued by any African government to date. Rwanda and Burundi have remained entirely silent on the issue, offering no official responses despite requests from media outlets for comment.

“I have lost contact with my friends”

In Rwanda, Batamurizi* (24) almost fell for the Alabuga programme’s promises of hospitality and tourism training for young women. “The videos they show feature African women in modern kitchens, serving food to Russian customers. But it’s a fantasy designed to exploit dreams of escape from poverty here.” She had wanted to go herself but aborted her flight to Russia after an alert from her cousin, who shared a screenshot of a message he had received from a friend in Poland. “In Russia, new job offers specifically for young girls (is) slavery,” it said, explaining that recruits were paid “700 US\$ per month and most of the money goes to the company to pay for bed and food. Labour all day and night. They produce the drones and other weapons to attack Ukraine. And now way to go out!! (sic).” The message stopped her in her tracks.

However, three of her friends, with whom she had studied, went to Alabuga nevertheless. “I have lost contact with each of them,” Batamurizi says.

“Several girls became pregnant”

Family formation

Among the perils facing female Alabuga recruits is pregnancy. Media reports, including from Alabuga’s own PR show that the programme promotes romantic possibilities, and materials include sections on “intercultural marriage” and “family formation.” “Several girls became pregnant during our time there,” Silas says. “The Russian authorities encouraged this, offering additional payments and benefits. But the girls who got pregnant couldn’t leave, even when they wanted to. They became completely dependent on the system.”

Vulnerability

Understanding why young East Africans are vulnerable to these recruitment schemes, including what appear to be broader demographic goals on the part of Russia, requires examining the region’s economic realities. Youth unemployment across the Great Lakes region averages over 60%, with limited opportunities for advancement even for university graduates. Russia’s recruitment drive explicitly targets this desperation. Application materials reviewed by ZAM ask detailed questions about family financial situations, employment history, and future goals. Recruiters appear to prioritise applicants from rural areas with limited educational opportunities and strong financial motivations. Peter confirms that, in his experience, Russia is not “randomly selecting people.” “They choose people who are desperate enough to take risks but smart enough to be useful. People with families to support, people facing limited futures at home.”

He fully understands why people like himself might flock to Russia, even when they know or suspect they may end up in the military. “When your family is struggling to eat, and someone offers you US\$800 a month plus free housing, you don’t ask many questions.” He believes that “many of those who go there know what may await them, but choose to lie to their friends and parents, saying they’re going to school. The money is too good to pass up, even if it means risking your life, considering the life we live here in Burundi.”

Orders from above

Among the few African state functionaries who have expressed concern about the fate of her country’s youth in the Russian war machine is Uwimana*, a senior education official in Kigali, the capital of authoritarian-ruled Rwanda. Speaking on condition of anonymity, Uwimana told ZAM, “We’ve seen a significant increase in young people expressing interest in Russian educational opportunities. But we are concerned about the vague nature of many of these programmes and the fact that some students who left have simply vanished from communication.”

When asked how the department can allow this to continue, she added: “Baker, you know how things work here; even I can’t dare ask anyone or hold anyone accountable...

This also applies to the whole ministry, because sometimes the decisions or discussions with these programmes are beyond our capacity to handle—the orders to work with these people are always coming from above.” Uwimana says she can only wish for “truth and transparency,” and for “governments [to] publicly acknowledge what’s happening, warn citizens about deceptive recruitment practices, and establish systems to monitor and assist their nationals abroad.”

“Some students who left have vanished from communication” Besides emphasising the need for better governance of African leaders, Uwimana also believes that international pressure on Russia to end deceptive recruitment practices is essential. “This is a form of human trafficking that violates international law. The international community has tools to address this, but it requires political will and coordinated action.” Dr Rodrigue Ndashinze in Burundi concurs: “Educational institutions and civil society organisations have roles to play in raising awareness and providing alternatives to vulnerable youth. We also need to address the underlying economic desperation that makes these schemes attractive.”

The Rwanda Investigation Bureau, the main body responsible for criminal investigations in the country, including human trafficking, did not respond to repeated requests regarding Russian recruitment activities.

Friendly Africa

While the Alabuga programme focuses on drone production, it represents just one element of a broader military recruitment effort. The total number of African recruits in Russia’s army is thought to exceed 35,000. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 3,344 foreign nationals who went to fight in Ukraine have received Russian citizenship since the start of 2024.

The military recruitment fits within the broader context of Moscow’s expanding influence across the continent. The Wagner Group’s activities in the Central African Republic, Mali, and other West African nations have established Russian military and political footholds, which now exist throughout Africa. The recruitment programmes also serve domestic Russian needs. With military losses mounting in Ukraine and domestic resistance to mobilisation growing, foreign recruits from what Russia terms “friendly countries” provide a politically acceptable source of manpower.

Meanwhile, hundreds of young people remain trapped in various stages of the Russian recruitment pipeline. Some assemble weapons in Alabuga factories, others undergo military training in Rostov-on-Don, and still others dodge artillery fire in Ukrainian trenches. Silas and others ZAM spoke to all exhort the international community to act. “Every day we delay action, more families lose their children to this system,” warns Silas. “I was lucky to escape, but so many others won’t be.”

Letters asking the embassies of Burundi and Rwanda if they were in touch with their nationals at Alabuga, or whether they were monitoring their safety and wellbeing, were left unanswered. A request for comment to Ugandan ambassador to Russia, Thomas Kizige, and a letter to the Kenyan embassy in Moscow were equally left without response.

► Awards Ceremony

Entries Open for MakanDay Investigative Reporting Award

The Eminent Prize for Investigative Journalism is now in its fourth year. This award recognises journalists who demonstrate exceptional commitment to uncovering hidden facts and holding leaders accountable.

Deadline: 31st October 2025

A panel of independent judges will review submissions and select up to two winners.

- Overall Winner: A brand-new laptop
- Runner-up(s): A three-month, fully paid internship at MakanDay
- Honourable Mentions: Up to two may be named and invited to the awards ceremony hosted by MakanDay

Winning and finalist entries will be featured on the [MakanDay website](#) and across our social media platforms.

Submission Guidelines

- Entries must uncover abuse of power, corruption, or expose injustice.
- Journalists may submit their own work or nominate another's work (with their permission).
- Eligible entries must have been published or broadcast between 1st January and October 31st 2025.
- Non-English entries must include a translation.
- For print entries: include a scanned copy (and, if unclear, a transcript in Word or PDF).
- For broadcast entries (TV, radio, or online video): include a link or attach the file.
- All entries must include a biography and photo of the entrant(s).
- The awards are open to all Zambian journalists and MakanDay contributors. However, MakanDay journalists are not eligible to participate.

Submit entries to: editor@makanday.org.

Visit: [MakanDay website](#)

