

The GLOCEPS

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Human Trafficking and the Conflict in Europe: Preparing Eastern Africa for Escalation

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Photo credit: bbc.com

Executive Summary

The emergence of trafficking pipelines that channel Eastern African citizens into Russia and, in some cases, onto the frontlines of the Russia–Ukraine war constitutes a multidimensional challenge. It combines elements of organised crime, exploitative labour, and irregular migration, all set against the backdrop of global geopolitical conflict. Traffickers and intermediaries are exploiting economic vulnerability and weak regulatory environments to lure individuals under false pretences of employment or training, subsequently exposing them to militarisation or forced labour. This paper examines four interrelated issues, which include; the entry point ecosystem of recruitment networks;

trafficking impacts on Eastern Africa; gaps in regional security governance; and the political–economic conditions that sustain vulnerability. The brief recommends a coordinated regional response through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC), involving intelligence sharing, stronger regulation of recruitment agencies, enhanced financial forensics to disrupt illicit flows, strengthened diplomatic engagement to protect trafficked nationals abroad, and upscaling socio-economic programs that address the root causes of irregular migration.





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Context

The protracted Russia–Ukraine war has shifted global economic and security dynamics, creating new vulnerabilities for migrant labour. Russia's demand for manpower and industrial labour has indirectly created opportunities that traffickers exploit. Networks in Africa have become active nodes in these recruitment chains, leveraging online platforms and local intermediaries. This crisis is largely driven by a domestic environment marked by high youth unemployment rates. With Eastern African economies unable to absorb millions of new labour market entrants annually, many governments have actively promoted labour export as a solution to unemployment and a source of remittances. While well-intentioned, this policy focus creates a permissive environment that illegal recruiters exploit. Traffickers pose as credible recruiters, exploiting the aspirations and economic despair of young people searching for work overseas. For instance, in September 2025, Kenyan police dismantled a trafficking ring in Athi River that had detained 22 citizens awaiting travel to Russia under the guise of job contracts. Recruitment materials, fraudulent contracts, and travel documents were seized, and suspects were detained. Survivors disclosed that they were required to pay deposits ranging from \$1,500 to \$18,000, rendering them both victims of fraud and debt bondage. Uganda has reported similar cases. In mid-2025, nine former Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) soldiers were intercepted at Entebbe airport while attempting to travel under contracts promising thousands of dollars monthly. Ugandan women have also been recruited into

Russia's Alabuga Special Economic Zone, ostensibly for work-study programmes but in reality forced into drone assembly under exploitative conditions. Citizens from Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have also been targeted with job offers promising payments of about \$2,200 per month, including incentives for their family members.

These examples illustrate that trafficking is not limited to combat roles but extends into militarised labour, such as the production of drones used on the battlefield. Somalia and Sierra Leone provide further evidence. Somali nationals have been captured in Ukraine, recounting how they were deceived by offers of stable work or non-combat support roles. Sierra Leonean youth have also been documented among foreign Prisoners of War (PoW) in Ukraine, highlighting the spread of these networks beyond Eastern Africa.



Photo Credit: abcnews.go.com

This context situates the problem within global trends. Trafficking of Africans reflects demand-side pressures such as labour shortages and high military attrition, and supply-side vulnerabilities which include youth unemployment, weak regulatory regimes, and porous borders. For Eastern African states already grappling with fragile economies and complex security environments, this trafficking trend poses a multidimensional threat that requires both domestic reform and regional coordination.

Key Issues

The trafficking of Eastern Africans into the Russia–Ukraine war is a systemic crisis, driven by criminal networks that exploit economic desperation,





regional security gaps, and governance failures. The following key issues highlight the operation, impacts, and root causes of this threat.



Entry Point Ecosystem

Recruitment networks operating across Eastern Africa and beyond deploy a layered, adaptive strategy that blends deception, opportunism, and targeted profiling to supply both labour and combat power for Russia's war economy. These schemes commonly begin online via social media, WhatsApp groups, and recruitment pages and advance through local intermediaries and unscrupulous labour agencies that circulate contracts, travel documents, and staged payment demands to build credibility. Victims are often steered toward work-study or scholarship opportunities in sectors such as construction, hospitality, athletics, or vocational training. However, the actual purpose is to funnel them into militarised labour or direct combat roles.

Traffickers deliberately align recruits with specific industrial or military-adjacent roles based on skills and profiles. The largest cohort is economically vulnerable youth, driven by acute unemployment and the lure of steady pay. Athletes in track, football, and combat sports are prized both for propaganda value and for physical resilience. Ex-soldiers and former police officers are directly targeted for their tactical skills as they can be deployed with minimal additional training. This systematic calibration, selecting people for labour, technical assembly, or battlefield roles, turns

human capital into instruments of war rather than into ordinary labour migration.

Concrete examples illustrate the scale. In Kenya, an intelligence-led raid rescued 22 people from an apartment near Nairobi after recruiters circulated contracts and collected deposits promising jobs in Russia. In Uganda, former UPDF soldiers were intercepted en route to Russia under lucrative but fraudulent contracts, while young women were channelled into the Alabuga drone factory under coercive conditions. Somali and Sierra Leonean nationals captured in Ukraine revealed that even non-combat promises translated into frontline deployment. Rwandans, South Sudanese, Burundians, and Nigerians have also surfaced in these networks. These cases underscore that Eastern Africa is part of a broader continental pattern, with each cohort selected to fulfil specific labour or combat functions.



Trafficking Implications

The trafficking of Africans into the Russia-Ukraine war reshapes the human rights and security landscape in four interlinked ways. First, the human rights violations are severe. Victims are coerced into hazardous work and combat, in clear violation of the Palermo Protocol and African human rights instruments. Cases such as Kenyan returnees injured on the battlefield or Ugandan women trapped in Alabuga's drone assembly lines highlight gendered exploitation and labour abuses. Somali and Sierra Leonean nationals detained as PoW further show how trafficked individuals are stripped of both agency and protection.





Second, the phenomenon constitutes organised crime. Trafficking rings profit through exorbitant deposits and forged documentation, drawing in local brokers and corrupt officials. For instance, the payments of up to \$18,000 in Kenya and \$6,000 monthly promises in Uganda reveal how illicit financial flows fuel broader criminal networks, entrenching corruption and undermining governance.

Third, the national security risks are serious. Returnees exposed to military conditioning labour risk destabilising communities as they may re-enter society with enhanced tactical skills and transnational ties, creating recruitment pools for extremist groups or criminal gangs. Public trust in the state's ability to protect citizens is also eroded.

Fourth, diplomatic complexities arise when nationals captured in Ukraine place governments in difficult positions, forcing negotiation with Russia, Ukraine, or intermediaries. Some governments hesitate to acknowledge involvement, fearing reputational damage, which leads to protracted detention and limited consular access. These dimensions underscore the layered nature of the crisis. Effective responses require integrated strategies that move beyond reactive policing.

Regional Security Governance Gaps

The persistence of trafficking pipelines reflects gaps in Eastern Africa's security governance. Intelligence agencies are often reactive rather than anticipatory, detecting recruitment only

after victims have been intercepted at airports or after arrests abroad. Weak inter-agency coordination compounds the challenge where immigration services, labour ministries, and intelligence units operate in silos, leaving loopholes that traffickers exploit.

Cross-border dynamics further complicate the issue. The porous nature of regional borders allows rapid adaptation of routes, making national enforcement alone insufficient. For instance, when Kenyan authorities tighten controls, traffickers shift operations into Uganda, and when Ugandan surveillance increases, they pivot to Somalia or Tanzania. These gaps are exploited by traffickers who move African recruits across borders using false documentation before being transferred to Russia or Ukraine.

Eastern Africa's institutional response remains fragmented and largely reactive. Despite regional commitments under the IGAD and the EAC, coordination among member states is hindered by the absence of harmonised visa regimes, interoperable data-sharing systems, and standardised legal procedures for investigating and prosecuting trafficking offences. This institutional fragmentation enables traffickers to exploit jurisdictional loopholes, shifting operations across porous borders and evading detection.

Effective countermeasures require stronger intelligence gathering drawing on human sources, open information from online platforms, and financial forensics to trace illicit activities. Systematic



debriefing of returnees, monitoring of online recruitment activity, and tracing of suspicious remittance flows can expose and disrupt trafficking networks. However, such measures require specialised skills, inter-agency cooperation, and sustained resources that remain limited across much of Eastern Africa.

Political-Economic Vulnerabilities

At the heart of the trafficking crisis are political-economy vulnerabilities that sustain demand and supply. Youth constitute approximately 70% of Africa's population, making unemployment within this demographic a critical policy concern. Each year, between 10 and 12 million young Africans enter the labour market, yet the region generates only about 3 million formal jobs. Consequently, nearly 80% of new labour market entrants face exclusion from decent employment, often relegated to informal, low-wage, and low-productivity work. In East Africa, the situation is particularly acute, with over half of individuals aged 15–35 unable to secure gainful employment. This creates a large pool of economically desperate individuals willing to take risks abroad. Brokers exploit this desperation by marketing illegal migration as a path to dignity and income.

Broader structural inequalities also sustain vulnerability. Regional economies are marked by dependence on remittances, fragile labour markets, and limited social protection. Families borrow heavily to finance overseas migration, making them susceptible to debt bondage. The



Photo credit: fintechassociation.africa

Alabuga drone factory exemplifies how these vulnerabilities can be channelled into militarised labour under exploitative conditions.

Governance weaknesses exacerbate the problem. Corruption within licensing agencies and immigration services facilitates the issuance of fraudulent contracts and travel permits. The absence of strong regulatory oversight of recruitment agencies allows criminal networks to pose as legitimate employers. Together, these drivers create a structural vulnerability that traffickers exploit.



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Conclusion

The trafficking of Eastern Africans into the Russia-Ukraine war is a direct consequence of the convergence between an intensive external demand for manpower and profound internal vulnerabilities. The evidence demonstrates that high youth unemployment, weak governance, and fragmented regional security cooperation are being systematically exploited by criminal networks. These networks transform human aspiration into a commodity for war, deceiving citizens into frontline combat or coercing them into militarised industries. This crisis is more than a crime; it is a hybrid threat that erodes state sovereignty, destabilizes communities, and implicates the region in a distant geopolitical conflict. Failure to mount a comprehensive, regionally-coordinated response risks normalizing the export of Eastern Africa's most valuable asset, its people, as instruments in foreign wars, with lasting consequences for human security and regional stability.



Recommendations

1. Eastern African Governments should:

- a) Strengthen licensing and oversight of recruitment agencies by maintaining transparent public registries and grievance mechanisms.
- b) Expand youth employment and apprenticeship schemes to provide alternatives to risky migration.
- c) Improve inter-agency coordination on trafficking cases.
- d) Work with tech platforms to remove online recruitment and trafficking content.
- e) Enhance intelligence capacity in monitoring open-source information and conducting financial forensics.
- f) Conduct systematic debriefing of returnees to generate actionable insights.
- g) Establish comprehensive protection and reintegration programmes that provide psychosocial support, medical care, and gender-sensitive services for survivors.
- h) Engage the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN bodies to secure PoW access and safe repatriation.

2. IGAD and EAC, with UNODC support, should:

- a) Form a joint counter-trafficking task force to harmonise laws, share intelligence, and coordinate border operations.
- b) Elevate trafficking-for-combat as a continental security issue within the AU Peace and Security Council and at the UN.
- c) Standardise victim-assistance protocols across member states to facilitate repatriation and reintegration.
- d) Mobilise donor support to strengthen intelligence and law enforcement capacity through targeted training and resource development.



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