



"I WAS TRICKED into the WAR."

The Risk of Human Trafficking and Coerced Recruitment of Bangladeshi Men into Russia's War in Ukraine

MARCH 2026

F7 FORTIFY RIGHTS

TRUTH HOUNDS

"I WAS TRICKED into the WAR."

The Risk of Human Trafficking and Coerced Recruitment of Bangladeshi Men into Russia's War in Ukraine



Fortify Rights works to ensure human rights for all. We investigate violations, engage people with power on solutions, and strengthen human rights defenders. We believe in the influence of evidence-based research, the power of strategic truth-telling, and the importance of working in close collaboration with individuals, communities, and movements pushing for change. Fortify Rights is an independent nonprofit organization registered in the United States and Switzerland.



Truth Hounds works to ensure justice for victims of international crimes committed in the context of armed conflicts and to prevent such violations in the future. Since 2014, the organization has been documenting and investigating international crimes and other serious human rights abuses in Ukraine and across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Cover:

The parents of 22-year-old "Ahmed," not his real name, from Brahmanbaria District in Bangladesh hold a photograph of their son who was killed on the frontlines in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. ©Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/ Fortify Rights, 2025.

MARCH 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	8
METHODOLOGY	11
Map of Bangladesh	14
Map of Human Trafficking Routes from Bangladesh to Russia	15
BACKGROUND	17
Russian Aggression Against Ukraine	17
Russia’s Engagement of Foreign Fighters	19
Demographics of Russia’s Foreign Fighters	21
The Involvement of Bangladeshi Fighters in Foreign Conflicts	23
The Human Trafficking of Bangladeshis to Foreign Countries	23
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF BANGLADESHI NATIONALS INTO THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES	25
Experiences of Other South Asians in the Russian Armed Forces	35
GOVERNMENT RESPONSES	39
Bangladesh Government Response	39
Ukraine Government Response	41
Russian Government Response	43
LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYSIS	45
The Applicable Legal Framework	45
International Humanitarian Law	45
International Human Rights Law	46
Trafficking in Persons	48
The “Act” Element: Recruitment, Transportation, Transfer, Harboring, or Receipt	49
The “Means” Element: Deception, Fraud, Coercion, and Abuse of Vulnerability	49
The “Purpose” Element: Exploitation Through Forced Services in Armed Conflict	51
Servitude and Practices Similar to Slavery	51
Application of Legal Framework to Identified Cases of Foreign Fighters in the Russian Army	52
Foreign Fighters Who Voluntarily Joined Russian Armed Forces	53
Foreign Fighters Deceived or Coerced into Joining the Russian Armed Forces	54
RECOMMENDATIONS	57
To the Government of the Russian Federation	57
To the Government of Bangladesh	57
To the Government of Ukraine	58
To U.N. Agencies and Anti-Trafficking Organizations	58
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	60





Patches and a military dog tag collected by 29-year-old Bangladeshi national "Mohammed Masud," not his real name. Masud fled the Russian military and returned to Bangladesh after being beaten and experiencing other abuses in the Russian army. ©Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/Fortify Rights, 2025.

SUMMARY



Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine sent shock waves around the globe and continues to destabilize global peace and security. Its impact extends far beyond Europe's borders. For example, brokers and recruitment networks are drawing men from Asia, Africa, and elsewhere into military service for the Russian army. Bangladeshi men are among those recruited—many of whom are recruited under false promises of civilian jobs abroad, only to be transported to Russia and forced onto the frontlines of the war against Ukraine—a practice that may constitute human trafficking.

This joint report by Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds reveals how Bangladeshi men were recruited through coercion and deception into the Russian Armed Forces. Through fraudulent job offers, misinformation, and scams, brokers target men from low-income countries with limited migration pathways into joining the Russian army. Many were routed through third countries, given Russian-language contracts they could not read, and transferred into military training facilities shortly after arrival in Russia. These men were then forced to provide the manpower needed to sustain Russia's advances into Ukrainian territory.

Several survivors described being sent into combat with little or no training and without knowledge that they were going to the frontlines. Others were beaten by commanders, denied pay, or prevented from leaving. Passports were confiscated. Attempts to escape

"Mohammed Masud" showing photos of himself in Russian military uniform and his military contract papers. ©Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/Fortify Rights, 2025.

were met with threats. Families in Bangladesh were left in crushing debt after paying recruitment fees—often thousands of U.S. dollars—only to later receive news of a son or husband killed on the frontlines.

The new government of Bangladesh, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party under Tarique Rahman, should prioritize ending the human trafficking and coerced recruitment of Bangladeshi men into the Russian Armed Forces by dismantling trafficking networks, holding perpetrators accountable, providing meaningful support to survivors and their families, and publicly condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds interviewed 24 individuals, including Bangladeshi men recruited into the Russian army, relatives of Bangladeshi men who died while serving in the Russian army, anti-trafficking service providers, and Bangladeshi anti-trafficking police. To reflect the wider regional perspective of recruits from South Asia, Truth Hounds interviewed prisoners of war from Nepal and Sri Lanka held in Ukrainian prisoner of war camps. These testimonies expose a wider pattern of Russia's potential involvement via recruitment in trafficking men from South Asia to supply its war machine.

One Bangladeshi survivor, Maksudur Rahman, 31, told Fortify Rights that after losing his job in Malaysia, he sought work overseas again to support his family. He said: "I was repeatedly assured [by the Bangladeshi broker] that this was not military work and had nothing to do with the war. ... Because of financial pressure and lack of alternatives, I agreed."

He traveled from Dhaka to Dubai and then to Moscow. Maksudur Rahman said, "At the [Moscow] airport, [brokers] demanded additional money. Groups of Bangladeshis were taken one by one into airport toilets, where cash was collected to avoid cameras. I paid about US\$1,000 under pressure."

The brokers gave Maksudur Rahman a document in Russian and, believing it to be a cleaning-services contract, he signed it. Soon after, Maksudur Rahman explained how he and others he had traveled with were sent to a Russian military compound:

Then, suddenly, we were transported at night to another location and eventually told through a translator that we had been "bought" to fight in the war. ... We were told the Russian government had paid a large sum for each of us and that we had no choice. We were taken to the frontline and forced into combat roles without proper training. ... Several Bangladeshis who were with me were killed [in the fighting].

Another Bangladeshi survivor who was trafficked into the Russian army, Arman Mondol, said: "I was tricked into the war by the brokers. What happened to me is unjust, and I hope it does not happen to others again."

The extent of the human trafficking of foreign nationals into the Russian army is unknown. Not all foreign nationals appear to have been deceived at the point of enlistment. In some cases documented in this report, individuals knowingly signed contracts. However, in almost all of such cases, evidence shows later coercion, beatings, confiscation of documents, and an inability to resign or leave military service—raising serious concerns under international human rights law.

For example, one Nepali man told Truth Hounds that he signed a contract with the Russian Armed Forces after speaking with other foreigners in Russia. While deception or coercion was not present before or when he signed the contract, later he experienced serious mistreatment during his service with the Russian Army, including beatings, the confiscation of personal documents, and an inability to withdraw from military service.

In addition to analyzing the legal status of foreign fighters under international humanitarian law to clarify that prisoner-of-war status does not negate human trafficking recognition, this report also applies international legal standards to the documented cases with a specific focus on the crime of human trafficking.

While not all cases documented in this report may satisfy the required elements to meet the international legal definition of trafficking in persons, the evidence suggests recurring patterns in line with the crime of human trafficking. Specifically, several of the cases show (1) an act, such as recruitment and transnational transfer; (2) a means, such as deception, fraud, abuse of vulnerability, coercion; and (3) a purpose, such as exploitation through forced military service and frontline deployment. Under the Palermo Protocol, to which Russia is a party, consent obtained through deception or abuse of vulnerability is legally irrelevant. Signing a contract in a language one does not understand does not constitute informed consent. As such, this report finds that the documented recruitment of foreign fighters into the Russian Armed Forces through deceptive and coercive practices may, in some cases, amount to human trafficking.

The report provides recommendations to:

- The Government of Russia to end deceptive recruitment practices, investigate trafficking networks, and comply with its obligations under international law.
- The Government of Bangladesh to intensify efforts to dismantle trafficking syndicates, hold perpetrators accountable, strengthen safe migration systems, provide comprehensive support to survivors and their families, and publicly condemn Russia's aggression.
- The Government of Ukraine to work with anti-trafficking organizations to screen foreign prisoners of war for trafficking and ensure access to protection mechanisms.
- U.N. agencies and anti-trafficking organizations to urgently recognize and address the transnational trafficking crisis linked to a war of aggression by Russia.

Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds hope this report will bring urgent international attention to the abusive recruitment practices fueling Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and turning people from Bangladesh and elsewhere into expendable manpower for its illegal war.

METHODOLOGY



The Russian military-issued identification tag of Bangladeshi national “Mohammed Masud,” who fled the Russian military and returned to Bangladesh after being beaten and experiencing other abuses in the Russian army. ©Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/Fortify Rights, 2025.

The aim of this report is to examine the recruitment of Bangladeshi nationals into the Russian Armed Forces in the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. It seeks to clarify the patterns and mechanisms of recruitment, document the experiences of recruited individuals, and assess the legal implications of these practices under applicable international law.

Between May 2025 and February 2026, Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds conducted 24 interviews in Bangladesh and Ukraine. Fortify Rights conducted 20 interviews, including with men from Bangladesh who were forced into the Russian army and transported to the frontlines in Russia or the occupied territories of Ukraine. Fortify Rights also interviewed survivors of trafficking who returned to Bangladesh, relatives of men who died in the war, service providers working with Bangladeshi migrants, and Bangladeshi anti-trafficking police.

Truth Hounds interviewed four prisoners of war from Nepal and Sri Lanka held in Ukrainian prisoner of war camps and communicated with officials from the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War and the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine—bodies responsible for overseeing prisoners of war and tracking the recruitment of foreign fighters into the Russian army.

Truth Hounds and Fortify Rights collected and analyzed open-source information and documents in Russian and Bengali languages related to the military recruitment process, including contracts and other documents reportedly used by brokers and the Russian Armed Forces. The research also examined the responses and policies of the Governments of Bangladesh, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation on military recruitment, addressing human trafficking, and engagement with foreign fighters.

Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds conducted interviews in English, Bengali, Ukrainian, Nepali, and Sinhala, using interpreters when needed. Everyone interviewed for this report provided free, prior, and informed consent to be interviewed and to have their testimony shared publicly. No one interviewed for this report received compensation, and all were informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and how the information might be used. For security reasons, the locations of some interviews, names of survivors, eyewitnesses, and other identifying details are withheld or changed in this report.

In several cases, elements of consent overlapped with indicators of coercion and exploitation, especially among the four prisoners of war interviewed by Truth Hounds. These cases demonstrate the importance of conducting individualized assessments when evaluating potential cases of human trafficking.

Limitations

This report faced several methodological constraints. For example, the organizations could not independently verify information about the experiences of Bangladeshi men killed on the frontlines as provided by relatives of the dead men. Interviews with prisoners of war were conducted in Ukrainian detention facilities in the presence of an official representative from the Ukraine Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, which may affect the completeness and candor of the testimony.

Our findings reveal recurring patterns in recruitment mechanisms and deceptive practices, though the sample size and geographic scope limit conclusions about their precise scale and distribution. We cannot determine what proportion of Bangladeshi nationals in Russia ultimately enter military service, what proportion do so on a knowing and voluntary basis compared to those who are misled or trafficked into the Russian Armed Forces, or whether recruitment experiences vary significantly across other nationalities and regions. This report does not conclude that all foreign fighters in the Russian army are victims of human trafficking; however, our evidence strongly indicates the existence of deceptive recruitment practices and human trafficking among Bangladeshi nationals involved in the Russian Armed Forces.

Additionally, this investigation did not examine the nature of connections between recruitment intermediaries and Russian state actors. Therefore, it is unknown whether intermediaries involved in deceptive recruitment practices and human trafficking operate independently or in coordination with Russian authorities or as part of official state structures.

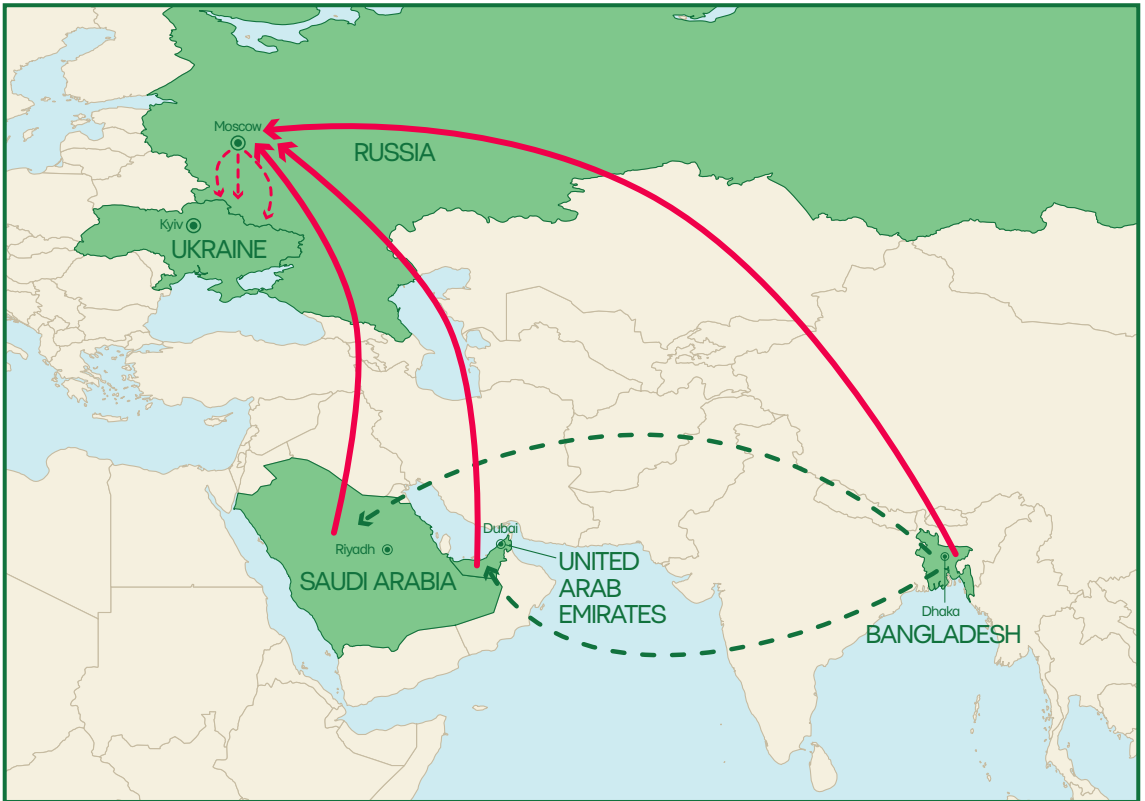


Arman Mondol, 23, from Kalipur in Rajbari District, Bangladesh showing a photograph of himself wearing a Russian military uniform.
©Tanbirul Miraj Ripon/ Fortify Rights, 2025.

MAP OF BANGLADESH



MAP OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING ROUTES FROM BANGLADESH TO RUSSIA



MAP OF UKRAINE TERRITORIES TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED BY RUSSIA AS OF FEBRUARY 2026



Source: Deep State, February 2, 2026. ©Map Tier. ©OpenStreetMap.

BACKGROUND

RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

Russian aggression against Ukraine began in late February 2014, which included Russia's occupation and annexation of Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. This aggression also led to Russia's support for armed groups in April 2014 and the deployment of disguised forces in eastern Ukraine that effectively established control over parts of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts.¹

On February 24, 2022, Russia escalated its aggression with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including a failed attempt to seize the Ukraine's capital city of Kyiv and take control of Ukraine's state administration.² During the four years of fighting—which is continuing at the time of writing—Russia expanded its occupation of Ukrainian territories from approximately seven percent in 2014 to 19.25 percent as of January 2026, while missile and drone attacks continue to affect communities across Ukraine.³ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) estimates that

¹ U.N. General Assembly, *Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol (Ukraine)*, U.N. Doc A/RES/71/205, December 19, 2016, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/858544?v=pdf>. During the initial stages of its 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine, Russia disguised the presence of its troops by removing identifying markings from their uniforms and formally denying their presence in Eastern Ukraine, claiming that any Russian soldier there was fighting as a “volunteer.” However, it is clear that Russian forces were directly involved, and in direct command, of the troops fighting in Eastern Ukraine. See, *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, European Court for Human Rights (ECHR), Case Nos. 8019/16, 43800/14 and 28525/20, Judgement (Trial), July 9, 2025, <https://www.echr.coe.int/w/grand-chamber-judgment-in-an-inter-state-case-1>.

² U.N. General Assembly, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine: Defending the Principles of the Charter of the United Nations*, U.N. Doc A/RES/ES-11/4, October 13, 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/ES-11/4>.

³ Валерій Соаков, “Deepstate: РФ окупувала 19,25% усієї території України [Deepstate: RF Occupied 19,25% of the Ukrainian Territory],” *Deutsche Welle*, January 1, 2026, <https://www.dw.com/uk/u-deepstate-pidrahuvali-plosu-okupovanoi-rf-ukrainskoi-zemli-u-2025-roci/a-75362496>. See also, Deep State Map, “Live Updates on Russia's Current Occupation of Ukraine Territories,” website, <https://deepstatemap.live/en#6/49.4383200/32.0526800>.

between February 22, 2022 and December 2024, civilian and military casualties on both sides have exceeded one million, including those killed and wounded.⁴ With the increase in Russian aggression, so too have indiscriminate attacks and other serious violations committed by the Russian army.⁵

The U.N. reported that the total civilian casualties in Ukraine in 2025 reached at least 2,514 killed and 12,142 injured, which is a 31 percent increase compared to 2024 and a 70 percent increase compared to 2023. Overall, between February 24, 2022 and December 2025, the U.N. registered more than 55,600 civilian casualties, with 14,999 killed—including 763 children—and 40,601 wounded—including 2,486 children—making the Russia-Ukraine war the most extensive and destructive conflict in Europe since World War II.⁶

Truth Hounds has conducted extensive documentation of Russian attacks on civilian populations across Ukraine, examining patterns ranging from deliberate targeting of non-combatants to systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure⁷. For instance, the organization has documented systematic short-range drone campaigns along the almost 250-mile [400-kilometer] front of the Dnipro River's right bank, where Russian forces target civilian populations, emergency responders, and non-military vehicles.⁸ Russian sources have designated these coastal areas as a "red zone" in which any movement constitutes a legitimate target.⁹

The period from 2023 to 2025 has been marked by a discernible increase in drone attacks affecting civilian populations across the region.¹⁰ This same period has also been characterized by the extensive deployment of other tactics directed against civilians or causing disproportionate harm to them. For instance, Truth Hounds identified and analyzed the expansion of double-tap strike tactics, frequently directed against rescuers and other first responders arriving at the scene of initial attacks. These findings were presented in a report, "Cruelty Cascade," published in October 2024.¹¹ However, Truth Hounds' ongoing daily monitoring of open sources indicates that Russian reliance on this tactic intensified in 2025, alongside a broader pattern of attacks targeting rescue personnel, including through other methods of assault. In parallel, the organization

4 "Total Casualties in Russo-Ukrainian War Exceed 1 Million — NATO," *The New Voice of Ukraine*, December 13, 2024, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/total-casualties-in-russo-ukrainian-war-exceed-1-million-nato-50473871.html>.

5 See, for example, Fortify Rights, "International Criminal Court: Investigate Russian Airstrikes and Drone Attacks on Civilians," June 24, 2025, <https://www.fortifyrights.org/ukr-inv-2025-06-24/>.

6 According to the U.N., in 2024, 2,088 civilians were killed in Russia's war on Ukraine and 9,133 were wounded. In the previous year, the U.N. recorded 1,974 civilian deaths and 6,651 injured. See, U.N. Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, *Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict. December 2025 Update*, January 12, 2026, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Protection-of-Civilians-in-Armed-Conflict-December%202025>; RAND, *Consequences of the Russia-Ukraine War and the Changing Face of Conflict*, May 22, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA3141-1.html.

7 See, for example, Truth Hounds, *Killzone: How Russian Drones Are Devastating the River Dnipro's Right Bank*, November 17, 2025, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/killzone/>; Truth Hounds, *Cruelty Cascade: Examining the Pattern of Russian Double-Tap Strikes in Ukraine*, October 17, 2024, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/cruelty-cascade/>; and Truth Hounds and Reporters Without Borders, *Last Check-In: The Russian Strikes on Ukrainian Hotels Silencing the Press*, May 16, 2025, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/last-check-in/>.

8 Truth Hounds, *Killzone: How Russian Drones Are Devastating the River Dnipro's Right Bank*, November 17, 2025, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/killzone/>.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 Truth Hounds, *Cruelty Cascade: Examining the Pattern of Russian Double-Tap Strikes in Ukraine*, October 17, 2024, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/cruelty-cascade/>.

documented an escalating pattern of attacks on hotels housing journalists, humanitarian workers, and other civilians, with 14 such attacks in 2024 alone.¹²

RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Foreign fighters have been participating in the Russian aggression against Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in 2014.¹³ At that time, the structure of recruitment into Russian and Ukrainian forces was quite similar, involving primarily ideologically motivated volunteers with diverse political views.¹⁴ On the Ukrainian side, foreign fighters came from varied backgrounds with different motivations, including Western veterans appalled by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as individuals driven by ideological and political beliefs. On the Russian side, foreign fighters often framed their involvement as part of an armed struggle against the "Western world," though they defined their motivations in vastly different ways depending on their ideological affiliations.¹⁵ Furthermore, financial compensation was rarely the primary motivating factor for these individuals.¹⁶

The year 2022 marked significant changes in both the structure as well as geography of Russia's engagement with foreign fighters.¹⁷ Before 2022, foreign citizens were mostly joining the Russian and Russian-backed forces not via the Russian army but via private military companies, like the Wagner group.¹⁸ These recruits were mostly citizens of former Soviet countries as well as Serbia, where Russian messaging heavily influenced a significant segment of the male population.¹⁹ After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, observers relate the change in Russia's approach to engaging foreign fighters with the failure of Russian troops to succeed in taking large sections of Ukrainian

12 Truth Hounds and Reporters Without Borders, *Last Check-In: The Russian Strikes on Ukrainian Hotels Silencing the Press*, May 16, 2025, <https://truth-hounds.org/en/cases/last-check-in/>.

13 Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych [The Polish Institute of International Affairs], *The Risks of Foreign Fighters in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict*, October 25, 2019, https://www.pism.pl/publications/The_Risks_of_Foreign_Fighters_in_the_UkraineRussia_Conflict.

14 Дар'я Куренная [Daria Kurenayaya], "Зачем иностранные наёмники едут воевать на Донбасс? [Why Foreign Mercenaries Travel to War in Donbas]," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/donbass--realii/30058796.html>.

15 Патрік Джексон [Patrick Jackson], "Іноземці: 'Я приїхав в Україну, щоб воювати за ... [I Came to Ukraine to Fight]," *BBC*, September 1, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2014/09/140901_ukraine_foreign_fighters_im.

16 Куренная [Kurenayaya], "Зачем иностранные наёмники едут воевать на Донбасс? [Why Foreign Mercenaries Travel to War in Donbas]," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

17 European Council on Foreign Relations, *Bound to Russia: Serbia's Disruptive Neutrality*, March 14, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/bound-to-russia-serbias-disruptive-neutrality/>; Council on Foreign Relations, *Russia's Influence in the Balkans*, December 2, 2022 (updated November 21, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-influence-balkans>; "Serbs See Russians as Main Ally, US as Biggest Threat," *IntelliNews*, May 3, 2024, <https://www.intellinews.com/serbs-see-russians-as-main-ally-us-as-biggest-threat-323659/>.

18 Ukrainian Prism, *Anatomy of "Wagner PMC": Creation, War in Ukraine and Ways of Countering the Group*, May 24, 2023, <https://prismua.org/en/wagner/>.

19 Council on Foreign Relations, *Russia's Influence in the Balkans*; "Serbs See Russians as Main Ally, US as Biggest Threat," *IntelliNews*.

territories during the so-called “special military operation” ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, combined with significant losses on the battlefield and the unwillingness of Moscow to announce a nationwide general mobilization campaign.²⁰

In this context, the Russian Federation launched strategies to attract foreign citizens into the army. In particular, Russia began offering incentives in the form of simplified citizenship acquisition to foreign nationals. One of the first regulatory acts, enacted on September 30, 2022, to support this strategy was Decree No. 690 of the President of the Russian Federation, which provided an opportunity for foreigners to obtain Russian citizenship if they signed a one-year contract with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and participated in combat operations for at least six months—or less if wounded in battle.²¹ This eliminated the requirements of having to know the Russian language and live in Russia for five consecutive years.²² The decree granted similar rights to the spouses, children, and parents of foreign fighters.²³

Russia expanded this incentive through Decree No. 350 on May 15, 2023 by removing the requirement of participating in combat operations or being a wounded veteran.²⁴ Although the decree removed the combat requirement, foreigners in the Russian Armed Forces are often assigned to frontline combat roles.²⁵ The adoption of Decree No. 10 on January 4, 2024 and amendments subsequently introduced by Decree No. 534 on July 31, 2025 further expanded access to citizenship for foreign fighters by reducing the processing time from three months to one month.²⁶

The latest Decree No. 821, issued on November 5, 2025, marks a change in the Russian government’s approach by repealing Decree No. 10.²⁷ Decree No. 821 provides new

20 Andrew Osborn and Polina Nikolskaya, “Russia’s Putin Authorises ‘Special Military Operation’ Against Ukraine,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/>; Center for Strategic & International Studies, *Russia’s Battlefield Woes in Ukraine*, June 3, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine>; and Center for European Policy Analysis, *Give Me Your Poor — Russia’s Mercenary Foot Soldiers*, March 27, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/give-me-your-poor-russias-mercenary-foot-soldiers/>.

21 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.09.2022 № 690 “О приеме в гражданство Российской Федерации в упрощенном порядке иностранных граждан и лиц без гражданства, заключивших контракты о прохождении военной службы” [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 690: On the Simplified Admission to Citizenship of the Russian Federation of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons Who Have Entered into Contracts for Military Service], September 30, 2022, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202209300053?index=1>.

22 Dasha Litvinova, “Putin Speeds up Citizenship Path for Migrants who Enlist in the Russian Military,” *Associated Press*, January 4, 2024 (updated January 5, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-decree-citizenship-army-ukraine-9377ofad165cc9388ec53bc71e4eb739>.

23 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.09.2022 № 690 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 690].

24 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 15.05.2023 № 350 “О внесении изменений в Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30 сентября 2022 г. № 690” [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 350: On Amending Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 690 of September 30, 2022], May 15, 2023, para. 1(b), <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202305150004>.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 04.01.2024 г. № 10 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 10: On the Admission to Citizenship of the Russian Federation of Foreign Citizens Who Have Entered into Contracts for Military Service in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or Military Formations, and Members of Their Families], January 4, 2024, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/50231/page/1>; Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31.07.2025 № 534 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 534, On Amendments to Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 10 of January 4, 2024], July 31, 2025, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202507310030?index=2>.

27 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 05.11.2025 г. № 821 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 821: On the Temporary Procedure for Admission to Citizenship of the Russian Federation and Issuance of Residence Permits in the Russian Federation], November 5, 2025, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/52569>.

requirements for any foreigner seeking permanent residence or citizenship in Russia. Specifically, they must have a military-service contract for at least one year, a contract with the Ministry of Emergency Situations, proof of prior qualifying service, or a certificate of unsuitability for military service.²⁸ In effect, this decree requires most foreigners to perform military service in order to enter or stay in the country.²⁹ However, the decree retains the earlier simplified citizenship procedures, such as waiving the Russian language requirement and extending eligibility to family members.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Information from the Ukrainian government indicates that most foreign fighters involved in the Russian Armed Forces are from Central Asian countries, where Russia has sought to maintain its sphere of influence after the fall of the Soviet Union.³⁰ While few foreign fighters appear to be of European and North American origin, thousands are reportedly from lower income countries in Africa, South and Central America, and Asia, including South Asia.³¹ For instance, a Bangladeshi man told Fortify Rights that the foreign fighters at his base included nationals from Iraq, Sri Lanka, China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and a significant portion from various African nations, such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda.³²

In November 2025, Dmytro Usov, the secretary of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, stated that Ukraine had identified 18,092 foreigners from 128 countries and “unrecognized territories”—meaning Russian-backed enclaves, such as Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhasi—in the Russian Army, of which 3,388 had reportedly died while serving.³³ The Coordination Headquarters further found that, as of September 2025, the number of contracts signed by foreign fighters was almost equal to the total number of contracts signed during all of 2024 and almost twice as high as in 2023.³⁴

28 Svetlana Osipova, Yelizaveta Surnacheva, Abdulla Zhusupaliyev, Systema and Azattyq Asia, “Putin Decree Forces Foreigners Seeking Russian Residency To Sign Army Contracts,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 12, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-decree-russian-citizenship-residence-permit/33621628.html>.

29 *Ibid.*

30 “Hochu Zhyt Project,” Telegram, June 17, 2025; May 8, 2025, https://t.me/hochu_zhyt/3557, https://t.me/hochu_zhyt/3426.

31 *Ibid.*; Sonya Savina, Egor Feoktistov, “Mercenaries From at Least 48 Countries Are Participating in the War on Russia’s Side,” *IStories*, April 23, 2025, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/en/stories/2025/04/23/mercenaries/index.html>.

32 Fortify Rights interview with Z.E., Bangladesh, August 14, 2025.

33 Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, February 3, 2026; Statement of Dmytro Usov, Secretary of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, “Crimea Global: Understanding Ukraine Through the South,” Third International Conference, November 18, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/live/1nDCDXODoIE?si=5TkbGacOL3FGAYg9>.

34 *Ibid.*

Involvement of Foreign Fighters from South Asia in the Russian Army

Data published by the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War indicates that South Asia represents a primary target for Russian Armed Forces recruitment efforts.³⁵ Within South Asia, recruitment brokers tend to target Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh—low income countries with high migrant flows and low employment rates.³⁶ Nationals from Sri Lanka and Nepal represent the highest number of foreign fighters from South Asia within the Russian Army and the highest numbers of fighters whose contracts have expired but who were not permitted to end their service and return home.³⁷

South Asians Recruited to the Russian Army as of February 2026³⁸

	Sri Lanka	Nepal	India	Bangladesh
Recruited	751 ³⁹	851	170	104
Deaths	275	116	23 ⁴⁰	34

The Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters does not disclose the number of prisoners of war from each country; however, they confirmed with Truth Hounds that, as of February 13, 2026, no citizens of Bangladesh have been held in Ukraine as prisoners of war. But there are prisoners of war from Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, and other countries.⁴¹

³⁵ Although South Asia is a key recruitment region for the Russian Armed Forces, the level of recruitment is incomparable to the countries of Central Asia. See, Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, December 2025 and February 2026.

³⁶ Savina, Feoktistov, "Mercenaries From at Least 48 Countries Are Participating in the War on Russia's Side," *IStories*; Cordelia Lynch "Treated Like Dogs': Russia Recruiting Thousands of Nepali Men to Fight in War on Ukraine," *Sky News*, April 16, 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/treated-like-dogs-russia-recruiting-thousands-of-nepali-men-to-fight-in-war-on-ukraine-13095184>; Sugam Pokharel, Matthew Chance and Mihir Melwani, "Russia has Recruited as Many as 15,000 Nepalis to Fight its War. Many Returned Traumatized. Some Never Came Back," *CNN*, February 11, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/10/asia/nepal-fighters-russia-ukraine-families-intl-cmd/index.html>; and Suhasini Haidar, "At Least 126 Indians Joined Russia Army, 16 'Missing,'" *The Hindu*, January 18, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-urges-russia-to-repatriate-indians-in-russian-army/article69108860.ecf/>.

³⁷ Member of the Verkhovna Rada [parliament] of Ukraine, Maryan Zablotsky, raised with the Russian Ombudsman the case of a Cuban national fighter who claimed that he was not provided payments or an annual break after serving in the Russian Army for one year. U.S. National Security Briefing, "Exposing Presence of Cuban Regime Troops Fighting for Russia in Ukraine," 2025, https://youtu.be/kLDNta-ujUs?si=mDoeET_Eo6LH34OA.

³⁸ Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, February 13, 2026.

³⁹ Earlier, in 2024, Sri Lankan authorities reportedly participated in the trafficking of 288 citizens into the Russian army, 16 of whom were killed on the frontline. See, "The 'Duped' Sri Lankans Fighting in Russia's Ukraine War," *Agence France-Presse*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240611-the-duped-sri-lankans-fighting-in-russia-s-ukraine-war>; "Sri Lanka Says 16 Citizens Killed Fighting in Ukraine," *Agence France-Presse*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/15/sri-lanka-says-16-citizens-killed-fighting-in-ukraine-a85129>.

⁴⁰ In 2024 media reported that 12 Indian citizens were killed on the frontlines. See, Ravik Bhattacharya, Kamaldeep Singh Brar, "'13 of 15 Non-Russians in Military Unit Dead': Indians Seek Return," *The Indian Express*, July 16, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/bengal-man-urgen-tamang-duped-into-russian-army-hopes-swift-return-9448678/>; "'Please Save Me': The Indians Duped into Fighting for Russia," *BBC*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly6ve2x72xo>.

⁴¹ Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 2025.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF BANGLADESHI FIGHTERS IN FOREIGN CONFLICTS

Bangladeshis participating in foreign conflicts is not a new phenomenon. Historically, those who travelled abroad to fight were often driven by ideology, shaped by anti-colonial sentiment or conservative interpretations of Islam.⁴² For instance, during the First World War when present-day Bangladesh was part of British India, groups of individuals from rural areas of what is now Bangladesh journeyed to Türkiye to oppose British forces and defend the Ottoman Empire while others joined the British Army.⁴³ Many of those who joined the Ottoman cause viewed their involvement as an effort to protect Islam from non-Muslim colonial rulers.⁴⁴

The situation for Bangladeshis involved in fighting alongside the Russian Armed Forces is different from those past ideologically-driven trends. While many Bangladeshis may be joining the Russian Armed Forces for economic reasons given high unemployment rates, particularly for youth, in Bangladesh, many others are recruited through deception or coercion by brokers, which may amount to human trafficking.⁴⁵

THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF BANGLADESHIS TO FOREIGN COUNTRIES

According to the U.N., Bangladeshi men are significantly affected by labor trafficking, including internationally, often through fraudulent job offers that lead to forced labor or debt bondage.⁴⁶ Economic need is the most significant risk factor of trafficking in persons in Bangladesh. Poverty and lack of prospects for income generation often lead people to accept risky employment and migration pathways for work.⁴⁷ Recent reports

⁴² Mubashar Hasan, "Why are Bangladeshis Joining Russia's War in Ukraine?," *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/why-are-bangladeshis-joining-russias-war-in-ukraine/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See, for example, Samya Kullab, "Workers from Bangladesh Sought Jobs in Russia but Instead Got Sent to Combat in Ukraine," *Associated Press*, January 27, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-bangladesh-migrant-workers-d7df6a8b2ff60b46ce8e3fa3aaf60e>.

⁴⁶ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime and Government of Bangladesh, *First National Study on Trafficking in Persons in Bangladesh*, October 2, 2022, <https://respect.international/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/First-National-Study-on-Trafficking-in-Persons-in-Bangladesh.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Unemployment rates for youth are particularly high in Bangladesh—more than double the national average. According to the International Labor Organization, "The global contraction of jobs is of grave concern, especially for Bangladesh, which is undergoing political, economic, social, and climatic transitions and sends over a million workers abroad." See, "Bangladesh Youth Unemployment Rate to Stay High," *The Daily Star*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/economy/news/bangladesh-youth-unemployment-rate-stay-high-3905616>; Asia Development Bank, *Bangladesh Economy to Slow to 3.9% Growth in FY2025 Before Rebounding in FY2026*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.adb.org/news/bangladesh-economy-slow-3-9-growth-fy2025-rebounding-fy2026>.

indicate that Bangladeshis have been trafficked into scam centers in Myanmar, promised jobs and kept in prison-like conditions en route to Europe, and affected by exploitative recruitment practices in Malaysia and elsewhere.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ "Eight Bangladeshis Rescued from Myanmar 'Scam Centre' Return Home," *BD News 24*, January, 22, 2026, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/84283e315c8c>; Mohammad Jamil Khan, "From Hope to Horror: The Dark Reality of Illegal Migration to Europe," *The Daily Star*, December 12, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/hope-horror-dark-reality-illegal-migration-europe-4057136>; Anders Melin and Niki Koswanage, "Everyone Gets a Cut, and Migrant Workers Pay the Price," *Bloomberg*, January 22, 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2026-bangladesh-malaysia-migrants/>.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF BANGLADESHI NATIONALS INTO THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES

In many cases documented by Fortify Rights for this report, Bangladeshis are not joining Russian Armed Forces voluntarily but rather are deceived by brokers and transferred against their will to the frontlines of the war with Ukraine—a situation that may amount to human trafficking.

Speaking about Bangladeshi trafficking survivors, Touhid Hossain, former Advisor for Foreign Affairs under Bangladesh’s interim government, stated in a press interview:

[Bangladeshis] who are going to the Ukraine war are not doing it willingly. We can say that they are pressured into it by travel brokers. Either they are offered something lucrative or, once they are abroad, they’re lured into it with offers of money. It’s an illegal scheme, and they, as well, travel there illegally.⁴⁹

In August 2025, the Bangladeshi Criminal Investigation Department reported knowledge of at least 20 suspected trafficking cases in the past two years involving Bangladeshis transported to Russia and forced to join the Russian military.⁵⁰ However, this may be a significant underestimate of the actual number of human trafficking cases, given the challenges of obtaining accurate information on the situation of Bangladeshis in Russia. Describing this challenge, Mustafizur Rahman, an Assistant Superintendent in the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the Bangladesh Police, told Fortify Rights:

⁴⁹ Nahid Anjuman, “Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia’s War,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 11, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladeshi-men-tricked-into-fighting-russias-war/video-71884856>.

⁵⁰ Rashad Ahamad, “Labour Migration to Russia Rises Despite War,” *New Age*, August 16, 2025, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/273185/labour-migration-to-russia-rises-despite-war>.

There is no accurate count of how many Bangladeshis remain stranded in the Russian war. The victims were recruited through informal routes, often deceived into thinking they would perform civilian work, such as cleaning or cooking in army camps. Upon arrival, they were forced to sign contracts in [the Russian language] and sent to the frontlines.⁵¹

Separately, Mohammad Badrul Alam Molla, the Special Superintendent of the Police Anti-Human Trafficking Unit in Dhaka, told Fortify Rights in January 2026:

[L]ack of awareness and economic desperation remain the key drivers behind these incidents. Many victims come from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds and do not fully understand the risks associated with irregular migration. Trafficking networks exploit this desperation by offering unrealistic promises of high salaries and secure jobs abroad.⁵²

* * *

“We don’t have much money as a family and my sister is unmarried,” Arman Mondol, 23, from Kalipur, Rajbari District, Bangladesh, told Fortify Rights. “To support my family, I went abroad and looked for an opportunity through an agency.”⁵³

He went on to explain how brokers deceived him into joining the Russian Armed Forces, saying: “[The brokers] told me I would make around US\$1,000 per month. I was told by the agency I would go to a European country, not Russia. I was told to sign a contract that I could not read [written in Russian]. That was the contract to go to war [for Russia].”⁵⁴

Arman Mondol told Fortify Rights how he traveled first to Saudi Arabia, where he obtained a Russian visa and then traveled on to Saint Petersburg in Russia.⁵⁵ In Russia, he was sent almost immediately for military training:

I spent two nights in a hotel [in Saint Petersburg]. After that, a Bangladeshi broker and two Russian men came to meet me. They said I needed training at a facility. I didn’t realize at first, but they meant military training. ... I attended basic [military] training for 10 days. ... I was trained to use rocket launchers and shoot a machine gun. It was an AK-47. A [Bangladeshi] man named [withheld] was with me on the same base. I don’t know the Russian language, but I understood that the high-ranking soldier commanded us to go to the frontline. I went to Ukraine to fight for 15 days. It was intense fighting.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.I., Bangladesh, October 30, 2025. Mustafizur Rahman of the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the Bangladesh police is also quoted as saying: “We are trying to weed out the entire human trafficking gang operating this new route to Russia. Some of the operations are here in Bangladesh. But this route, this human trafficking route, is new. That’s why we’re taking it seriously and we are trying to stop this thing.” See, Anjuman, “Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia’s War,” *Deutsche Welle*.

⁵² Fortify Rights interview with Mohammad Badrul Alam Molla, the Special Superintendent of the Police Anti-Human Trafficking Unit in Dhaka, January 31, 2026.

⁵³ Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., Bangladesh, August 1, 2025.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* The media outlet, *Deutsche Welle*, separately interviewed Arman Mondol and a broker from the agency and published an article on Arman Mondol’s experience. Arman Mondol told *Deutsche Welle*, “They told us to sign a paper written in Russian. We didn’t understand it. It was actually a document to join the Russian army and we signed it without understanding it.” In response, the broker said: “We sent them with visas to work as cleaners and for a salary of about US\$1,000 per month. But they signed a second agreement [in Russia] with a lucrative offer of over US\$16,000 monthly salary. They did not inform me, nor the brother of my partner, who went there with them. We learned all this after they were totally entrapped. See, Anjuman, “Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia’s War,” *Deutsche Well*.

⁵⁵ Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., Bangladesh, August 1, 2025.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Arman Mondol also described how he was wounded in the war. He said:

After one of our breaks from the war, we took a truck back to the frontlines. It was a big military truck. We were heading into the Ukrainian area, and they had planted a landmine. Our truck hit the landmine and, after the blast, many people got wounded, and some died. Right after, the Ukrainian army used a drone to bomb us again. There was a motorbike in the truck. So, I used it to escape. I was wounded in my leg because of the attack [showing a photograph of his injured leg]. I used the motorbike to drive around 50 kilometers [approximately 31 miles] from Ukraine to Russia. The Russian military gave me medical treatment.⁵⁷

Arman Mondol shared with Fortify Rights Russian-language documents stamped by the Russian Military Hospital. The documents confirm that Arman Mondol received medical treatment at the casualty department of the military hospital in Krasnodar Krai, Russia, and that he returned to his military unit in the same region at the end of March 2025.⁵⁸

Arman Mondol described to Fortify Rights his escape after he was returned to military duty, saying:

[D]uring one of my breaks [from the frontlines], I went to Moscow, where I have a relative. ... I went to the Bangladesh consulate in Russia and told them the whole story of being tricked to fight and not being able to leave. They issued me a travel document and supported my return to Bangladesh.⁵⁹

He concluded: "I was tricked into the war by the brokers. What happened to me is unjust, and I hope it does not happen to others again."⁶⁰

* * *

Maksudur Rahman, 31, told Fortify Rights that he previously worked in Malaysia but lost his job. After returning to Bangladesh, he sought work abroad again. A local broker informed him that Russia was recruiting workers and that a company would arrange his visa.⁶¹ Maksudur Rahman said:

I was repeatedly assured [by the broker] that this was not military work and had nothing to do with the war. ... The broker said it was a civilian contract job and told us not to worry. We were told the visa was a business visa and that everything was arranged through a company. Because of financial pressure and lack of alternatives, I agreed. ... Eventually, we were taken to the airport [in Dhaka], bypassing proper procedures. Our flight route was Dhaka to Dubai and then onward to Russia.⁶²

Maksudur Rahman said he arrived in Russia in December 2024: "At the [Moscow] airport, [brokers] demanded additional money. Groups of Bangladeshis were taken one by one into airport toilets where cash was collected to avoid cameras. I paid about US\$1,000 under pressure."⁶³

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Russian language medical document and military document on file with Fortify Rights.

⁵⁹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., undisclosed location, August 1, 2025.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Fortify Rights interview with Maksudur Rahman, Bangladesh, February 1, 2026.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

The brokers gave Maksudur Rahman a document in Russian and, believing it to be a cleaning-services contract, he signed it.⁶⁴ Soon after, Maksudur Rahman explained how he and others who signed the contract were sent to a Russian military compound:

[W]e were moved between locations in Moscow and later taken to a military cantonment. At first, we were given food and kept there for several days. Then, suddenly, we were transported at night to another location and eventually told through a translator that we had been “bought” to fight in the war. We protested and said we had come for civilian work, but we were threatened and abused. We were told the Russian government had paid a large sum for each of us and that we had no choice.⁶⁵

According to an *Associated Press* investigation, which included an interview with Maksudur Rahman, a Russian commander told him through a translation application, “Your agent sent you here. We bought you.”⁶⁶

Maksudur Rahman told Fortify Rights about the conditions on the frontlines:

We were taken to the frontline and forced into combat roles without proper training. People were taken at different times, day and night, without any clear system. Several Bangladeshis who were with me were killed [in the fighting]. ... I did not receive any salary. There was no proper communication, electricity, or internet in the war zone.⁶⁷

Maksudur Rahman was wounded during his time fighting for the Russian military and taken to a hospital. He later told Fortify Rights: “I escaped from the hospital and stayed hidden inside Russia for some time, moving from place to place. Eventually, I contacted the Bangladesh Embassy and asked for help.”⁶⁸

Maksudur Rahman said he lost more than one million Bangladeshi taka [approximately US\$8,130] as a result of being trafficked, saying: “I am now deeply in debt. I have loans, mortgaged land, and creditors pressuring me. My family—my parents, wife, and child—are suffering because of this.”⁶⁹ He ended the interview saying:

I was promised a job as a janitor, including cooking and cleaning, but there was no trace of such work. We were forced to wear military uniforms and live in inhuman conditions. There was no certainty of survival. I want justice. The people who trafficked us must be held accountable so that others do not suffer the same fate.⁷⁰

* * *

“Mohammed Masud,” not his real name, 29, from Munshiganj District in Bangladesh and three friends worked with the Chinese agency Sinopec Engineering Group Rus LLC based in Dhaka, Bangladesh to arrange travel and obtain a visa and work permit in Russia.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* See also, Kullab, “Workers from Bangladesh Sought Jobs in Russia but Instead Got Sent to Combat in Ukraine,” *Associated Press*.

⁶⁵ Fortify Rights interview with A.E., Bangladesh, February 1, 2026.

⁶⁶ Kullab, “Workers from Bangladesh Sought Jobs in Russia but Instead Got Sent to Combat in Ukraine,” *Associated Press*.

⁶⁷ Fortify Rights interview with Maksudur Rahman, Bangladesh, February 1, 2026.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

When he first arrived in Russia, he worked with a Russian government company: "The company operates in the construction and Russian gas sectors, where our main task was to connect cables throughout the day," he told Fortify Rights.⁷¹ A broker later contacted him online. He said: "We told the [broker] that we would not join the war. ... We joined as electricians. We have skills in several areas. ... We don't want to join the war."⁷²

He signed a new contract through the broker with the understanding that he would serve as an electrician and not be sent to the frontlines. Sharing what followed, he said that in January 2025 he was taken to a military camp:

[A]fter signing the contract, I discovered it was instead for a combat battalion. ... We raised this issue again with the [broker], who told us we could speak directly with the commander of our unit, who would reassign us based on our skills. Yet, when we presented our documents to the commander, he informed us that we were required to participate in combat and that the person who had promised us non-combat roles had deceived us.⁷³

He described to Fortify Rights the situation on the frontlines:

[The Russian Armed Forces] sent us into the battle, and then we realized there were no options to escape. ... On the battlefield, we have to work a lot. Every day, ten to 15 kilometers [approximately nine to 10 miles], we have to walk and have to collect the dead bodies and put them in vans. Some 30 to 40 kilogram [roughly 66 to 88 pounds] sacks, we have to carry them to the military bases. ... I saw missiles and artillery. It's always on the front lines. I was attacked by bombs five times, but thanks to Allah, I am still alive.⁷⁴

Speaking about the casualties on the frontlines, he said: "Many people were killed. I personally saw five Bangladeshi people killed. We three friends went there together, but one of my friends is no longer with us because he died in the war."⁷⁵

Fortify Rights first interviewed Mohammed Masud while he was still on the frontlines. At this time, he said: "There are no options to flee. I tried many times. If I flee and stay in Donetsk city, then they can easily find me. If I try to go to Romania, then I have to cross Ukraine, which is also risky from both sides. From here to Russia, there are many checkpoints."⁷⁶

Later, a Russian commander beat Mohammed Masud:

On one occasion, my late friend and I were tortured by the commander, who demanded money from us. He fabricated various reasons, claiming that he needed to buy a motorbike because the government had not provided one or that he had to purchase the food as it was not supplied by the government. ... [H]e beat my friend and another Bangladeshi worker with a gun and kicked them repeatedly. As I returned from duty during the incident, he also began assaulting me.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.E., Bangladesh, October 14, 2025.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Fortify Rights interview with Z.E., Bangladesh, October 14, 2025 and Fortify Rights interview with Z.E. Bangladesh, August 13, 2025.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Mohammed Masud (using a different name) told *Associated Press* he was beaten with a shovel and

In August 2025, Mohammed Masud managed to escape. Fortify Rights interviewed him again in Bangladesh, where he shared the circumstances of his escape:

I returned with two other Bangladeshi people. Originally, there were five of us from Bangladesh working [in Russia]; one remains there, while another lost his life. I arrived back in Bangladesh on August 7, 2025. The Russian authorities were not aware that we were returning permanently. They were under the impression that we were merely on holiday and would return. We deliberately did not inform them of our true intentions.⁷⁸

Fortify Rights also spoke to Mohammed Masud's brother. He said:

When my brother, [Mohammed Masud], was preparing to go to Russia, I was in Saudi Arabia. I was aware that he had joined a company called Sinopec as an electrician. After about a month, I learned that he had been assigned to a construction site where the temperature was extremely cold.⁷⁹

Later, when Mohammed Masud signed the contract to join the Russian Armed Forces, his brother was encouraged. He said:

Since my brother is trained as an electrician, he expressed a desire to join in that capacity. He would not be involved in combat but could serve as an electrician. I especially encouraged him to take this position, as it was safer and allowed him to work in his trained field. However, after joining, things took a different turn. He was assigned to a frontline battalion and compelled to engage in combat duties. This news upset me greatly. After two months of training, he was sent to the battlefield. He would send us videos from there, which were distressing to watch, and on some days, they brought me to tears.⁸⁰

Mohammed Masud's mother also shared with Fortify Rights her anxiety while her son was on the frontlines. She said: "During a video call, I saw him wearing a military uniform. He was almost unrecognizable, but I could identify him by his face. As a mother, it was distressing to see him in uniform, knowing that he had joined a combat zone."⁸¹

Speaking about the financial costs involved and her engagement with the recruitment agency, she said: "I had to pay 400,000 Bangladeshi taka [approximately US\$3,270] for my son to travel to Russia."⁸² She continued:

The company that facilitated [Mohammed Masud] trip to Russia never spoke to me directly. Six months after he left for Russia, I received a letter from the Sinopec company. The letter, written in Bangla ... states that [Mohammed Masud] voluntarily joined the Russian military and that the company would not be liable if anything happened to him.⁸³

handcuffed. He told *Associated Press* that because of language barriers "if [the Russian commanders] told us to go to the right and we went to the left, they would beat us severely." See, Kullab "Workers from Bangladesh Sought Jobs in Russia but Instead got sent to Combat in Ukraine," *Associated Press*, January 27, 2026.

⁷⁸ Fortify Rights interview with Z.E., Bangladesh, October 14, 2025.

⁷⁹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.G., Bangladesh, October 14, 2025.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.H., Bangladesh, October 14, 2025.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

* * *

Fortify Rights also spoke to relatives of Bangladeshis who died while serving in the Russian Armed Forces. The father of 22-year-old “Ahmed,” not his real name, from Brahmanbaria District of Chattogram (formally known as Chittagong) Division in Bangladesh, said:

Our family paid a total of 9.5 Lakh Bangladeshi taka [approximately US\$8,600] to the [recruitment] agency. [Ahmed] first worked for five months as a welder. He then told me on the phone that he was given 20 days of training by the military. Once he joined [the Russian military], there was no way to go back. First, he may have agreed [to join the Russian army] because the agency told them he would be a cook.⁸⁴

Documents in the Russian language shared with Fortify Rights by Ahmed’s family indicate that he was working as a welder on the border with China near Blagoveschensk in Amur Oblast, Russia before joining the Russian Armed Forces. Like Mohammed Masud Ahmed’s visa document refers to Sinopec Engineering Group Rus LLC.⁸⁵

Describing the financial challenges faced by the family to send Ahmed abroad, his mother said: “We are a poor family. We took a loan to send him abroad, and we have been unable to pay it back.”⁸⁶

Ahmed’s father went on to say:

[My son] was taken to Ukraine to fight. He told me on the phone he was in Ukraine [on the frontlines]. My son can’t read Russian. He signed documents without knowing exactly what was going to happen to him. ... The agency broker betrayed him. Later, we translated some of the Russian documents, and it was a contract to join the Russian army in a fighting position.

According to media reports, Ahmed may have died in a drone attack.⁸⁷ Reflecting on his son’s death, his father said:

April 13, 2025 was the last phone call I had with my son. It was a video call. He told me, “Father, pardon me if I have ever done anything wrong.” He said, “We can’t meet anymore. I can’t escape. Please look after the family.” I asked if he could flee to Poland. He said there was no way to go to Poland. He said, “I have to fight and accept my fate.”⁸⁸

* * *

The wife of 45-year-old “Imran Ali,” not his real name, told Fortify Rights that her husband and his brother traveled together to Russia with support from a Bangladeshi recruitment agency.⁸⁹ According to Imran Ali’s wife the agency arranged for her husband

⁸⁴ Fortify Rights interview with Z.D., Bangladesh, August 2, 2025.

⁸⁵ Document on file with Truth Hounds and Fortify Rights, 2024. Sinopec is the same company that brokered Mohammed Masud to travel to Russia.

⁸⁶ Fortify Rights interview with Z.C., Bangladesh, August 2, 2025.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Masuk Hridoy and Tafsilul Aziz, “Migrant Worker Forced to Fight for Russia Killed in Drone Attack,” *The Daily Star*, April 19, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/nrb/away-home/expat-death/news/migrant-worker-forced-fight-russia-killed-drone-attack-3875381>.

⁸⁸ Fortify Rights interview with Z.D., Bangladesh, August 2, 2025.

⁸⁹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.F., Bangladesh, September 27, 2025.

and her husband's brother to travel to Saudi Arabia on a religious visa first before obtaining a Russian visa in Saudi Arabia. Her husband and his brother reportedly spent three months in Saudi Arabia before traveling to Russia.⁹⁰ She said:

After arriving in Russia, my husband called me via video call and showed me around the city. I felt he was happy there. After a few days, [the brokers] said my husband and others would be taken to another place. Then, they signed a paper. They could not read the paper [written in Russian]. Then, the broker took them to Russia's war with Ukraine. First, they did not understand where they were, but when they saw the military bases and training grounds, they could understand as they were now in the war zone. This is what my husband told me via a phone call.⁹¹

She continued, saying:

My husband went to Russia for a better job, but it was a trick. The people who took [my husband and brother-in-law] to Russia gave them a paper written in the Russian language and asked for a signature, claiming it was a company document [for a civilian job]. However, it was a war contract, and the paper was in Russian. They did not understand it.⁹²

The Bangladesh Foreign Ministry informed Imran Ali's wife that her husband had been killed on the frontlines. She said:

I was told they were in Donetsk Region [when he was killed]. ... I received a call from the Ministry, and they asked me, "Have you had any contact with your husband?" I said, "No." I told them I had not heard from him for at least four or five months. Then they asked me, "Did you hear your husband died?" I replied, "No." After [the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry] told me the Russian embassy sent them a letter, stating that he [Imran Ali] was killed in the war.⁹³

Imran Ali's wife traveled to Dhaka to meet with the Foreign Ministry. She said, "They showed me the letters, and I matched the name, passport number, and national ID number. They all matched."⁹⁴ At the time of writing, Imran Ali's body has not been returned to Bangladesh.

* * *

The brother of Habibullah from Narsingdi in Narsingdi Division in Dhaka, Bangladesh told Fortify Rights how his brother wanted to go to Italy for work. The family engaged a Bangladeshi broker for 25,000 Bangladeshi taka [approximately US\$2,000]. The broker told the family that Habibullah would first need to go to Saudi Arabia on a religious visa then travel to Russia before continuing on to Italy.⁹⁵ His brother told Fortify Rights:

I asked [the brokers], "Why Russia?" They said that after Russia, he would go to another country. I said "No." I would not allow the brokers to take my brother to Russia. Even my brother told me he didn't want to go to Russia where there is an ongoing war. He said, "I don't want to go to Russia." But the broker said he must go to Russia with a tourist visa. [The brokers] told us that after arriving in Russia, if my

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Fortify Rights interview with Z.A., Bangladesh, May 31, 2025.

brother works at a Russian chocolate factory for at least 15 days or one month, then they can send him to Italy. They said there would be no benefit to staying in Russia. ... There are many brokers. My brother didn't know the broker would sell him to the Russian broker for the war.⁹⁶

Continuing, the brother said:

When [Habibullah] arrived in Russia, he called us and said, "Maybe my dream was wrong. I don't feel safe here." He told me on the phone, once he realized he was trafficked, "The broker sold me for US\$27,000 into the Russian army. I am a human and a child of a human, someone's son. How did one human sell another human?" He was so shocked.⁹⁷

After learning that his brother was being taken to an "army camp," he contacted the broker. Describing the conversation, he said:

I asked [the broker] why he was taking my brother to join the army? "Is he fit to join the military?" I told him, "Give him a job at the factory." Then, the broker said [Habibullah] had to just clean and take care of weapons in the camp of Russian soldiers. He said they would pay him US\$2,000 or US\$2,500. I replied, "He and our family don't need that amount of a salary. Please allow him to work in a factory. I know there is a war going on." But the broker said, "[He will] just stay ten to 15 days, and I will bring him back." Then the broker took [Habibullah] to the military base, made a contract for one year, and took his signature.⁹⁸

Despite signing the contract, the brother clarified that Habibullah did not consent to joining the Russian Armed Forces. "My brother always refused that proposal and requested that the broker take him from the military base at any cost," said Habibullah's brother. "He told the broker the war was ongoing here."⁹⁹

Habibullah's brother went on to describe his brother's desperation after being forced into the Russian Armed Forces. He said:

My brother tried a lot to escape from the war, but the Russian military followed him everywhere, even when he went to the bathroom. They would have killed my brother if they were aware that my brother attempted to escape from the battlefield. For fear of that, he didn't escape. The Russian Army seized his passport and other supporting documents. My brother cried a lot [on the phone]. He shouted a lot like he saw death in front of him. He told me that he spoke to the broker, saying, "Please, God, save me, I beg you for my life. You don't have to return my money. Please save my life. Help me return to my home country."

Regarding his death, Habibullah's brother told Fortify Rights that May 1, 2025 was the last time he spoke with him by phone. During that call, Habibullah pleaded, "Please save me if you can. I haven't eaten for three to four days." He cried a lot [on the phone].¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* A Special Superintendent of Police of the anti-trafficking unit told Fortify Rights about a trafficking case similar to that of Habibullah. The police said, "[The Criminal Investigation Department] is currently investigating a recent case in which individuals were recruited under the pretext of factory work in Russia – specifically employment in a chocolate factory – but were later sent to the Ukraine war zone. This investigation is ongoing, and authorities are still collecting documents and evidence to determine who facilitated these movements and through which routes."

⁹⁷ Fortify Rights interview with Z.A., Bangladesh, May 31, 2025.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

About a month later, a close friend of Habibullah's in Russia phoned the family in Bangladesh and informed them, "Habibullah has left this world. He has died."¹⁰¹

"I request that others not get trapped by fake promises and human trafficking," Habibullah's brother told Fortify Rights towards the end of the interview.¹⁰²

* * *

Mohammad Nazrul Islam, 45, was a former Bangladeshi Army serviceperson who retired in 2020 and later died on the frontlines in Russia after being taken there by a broker. His brother told Fortify Rights: "My brother was trafficked to Russia to fight against Ukraine, and he was killed in war. We learned about my brother's death only recently. After April 20, 2025, we stopped receiving any news from him. We tried contacting various offices."¹⁰³

Mohammad Nazrul Islam's brother explained to Fortify Rights how Bangladeshi authorities, as well as journalists, confirmed his brother's death:

In early October 2025, we finally received a phone call confirming that he had died. I then verified the information with journalists and the Foreign Ministry, who confirmed his death and advised us on completing the paperwork to bring his body home. ... He had been promised civilian work abroad, such as a cooking job, but was instead forced into military training in Russia. He was targeted specifically because he was a retired Bangladesh Army officer.¹⁰⁴

"The government has said they will look into it, but we don't know when or if the compensation will arrive or whether Nazrul's body will truly be brought back," his brother told Fortify Rights.¹⁰⁵

According to the Bangladesh national paper *Prothom Alo*, family members said Mohammad Nazrul Islam thought he was going to work as a security guard in Russia.¹⁰⁶ A Bangladeshi broker named Farid Hossain, who disputes the claims of trafficking, reportedly made arrangements for Mohammad Nazrul Islam. He said:

I did not send Nazrul to Russia. He went through an agency named "Beacon Tours and Travels." I only facilitated communication. He knew everything. He knew he would work as a logistical hand for the Russian army. ... Last night, I heard the ministry confirmed Nazrul's death. What's the point of blaming me here?¹⁰⁷

Airin Akter, Mohammad Nazrul Islam's wife, told the media: "It was a good-paying job as a security guard in Russia. The family's situation would improve. Now, how will I survive with four daughters?"¹⁰⁸

Fortify Rights has not been able to independently verify the claims of Mohammad Nazrul Islam's brother.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Fortify Rights interview with A.B., Bangladesh, October 20, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ প্রতিনিধি রাজবাড়ী [Nazrul from Rajbari], "ইউক্রেন যুদ্ধে নিহত রাজবাড়ীর নজরুল, স্ত্রীকে বলেছিলেন, 'মনে হয় জীবিত ফিরতে পারব না [Man Killed in the Ukraine War, Had Told His Wife: 'I Don't Think I Will Return Alive.'],'" *Prothom Alo*, October 10, 2025, <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/pknbgg3eb>.

¹⁰⁷ "If My Phone Is Off, Assume I Am No More': Former Army Man Killed in Russia-Ukraine War" *Dhaka Stream*, October 9 2025, <https://www.dhakastream.net/bangladesh/if-my-phone-assume-i-am-no-more-former-army-man-killed-russia-ukraine-war-186158>.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

EXPERIENCES OF OTHER SOUTH ASIANS IN THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES

Although not central to this report's findings, it is notable that India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have become significant sources of men recruited into the Russian military.¹⁰⁹ Truth Hounds interviewed four such individuals—two from Sri Lanka and two from Nepal—who were being held as prisoners of war by Ukrainian forces at the time of the interviews.

A man from Nepal, who faced economic hardship due to limited employment opportunities and the need to support his family, told Truth Hounds:

I still had my children, and I wanted to empower my children. I wanted to make them stronger than any other people in the society. That's why I went to the Russian embassy in Kathmandu, and there I understood a lot of things about how to process my visa to go to Russia. They said that there is no need to be in the army, you could be a civilian worker also there.¹¹⁰

At the Russian Embassy, he met a Nepali broker who helped him obtain a short-term Russian visa. Although Nepali officials advised him not to travel to Russia for his own safety, he was confident that he would be able to find a civilian job there.¹¹¹

To cover his travel expenses, he borrowed around US\$1,500 from a friend. He left Nepal on October 3, 2023, and arrived in Moscow along with 14 other Nepalis. As his visa was set to expire in seven days, he sought employment opportunities and encountered several Indian nationals who informed him about recruitment open for Nepali citizens to join the Russian military. He told Truth Hounds:

¹⁰⁹ In 2025, the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War said they were aware of 111 Indians who had fought for Russia. In 2024, India successfully negotiated the withdrawal of its citizens from combat zones, with Russia facilitating their return home. This was due to sustained pressure by New Delhi and political leverage because of India's close military ties with Russia and its trade deals with Russian oil producers. However, according to the Indian press, at least seven Indian citizens underwent a 15-day training in the Russian army in August 2025, and at least eight Indian nationals were reported as missing on the Russia-Ukraine frontlines in September 2025, indicating a continuation of illicit recruitment of Indian nationals into the Russian Armed Forces. In October 2025, two Indian families received the bodies of their sons who were reportedly killed serving in the Russian military. See, Keshav Padmanabhan, "India seeks Consular Access for Russian PoW in Ukraine Custody. But his Potential Return is Complicated," *The Print*, October 15, 2025, <https://t.co/hWxCqoMFf9>; "Hochu Zhyt Project," *Telegram*; Gopal Sharma, "Nepal Halts Work Permits for Russia, Ukraine After Soldiers Killed," *Reuters*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nepal-halts-work-permits-russia-ukraine-after-soldiers-killed-2024-01-05/>; "Sri Lanka says Russia to Stop Recruiting Fighters from the Island," *Agence France-Presse*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2528636/world>; Sakshi Dayal and Krishn Kaushik, "India says it Uncovers Trafficking Racket Duping People into Fighting for Russia in Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-says-it-busts-trafficking-racket-duping-people-into-fighting-russia-2024-03-08/>; Rama Parajuli and Kelly Ng, "Nepal: Twelve Arrested for Smuggling Nepalis into Russian Army," *BBC*, December 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67635359>; "The 'Duped' Sri Lankans Fighting in Russia's Ukraine War," *Agence France-Presse*; Sukhbir Siwach, "Killed in Drone Strike, Haryana Youth Who Went to Russia for 'Better Life' Cremated" *The Indian Express*, October 30, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/killed-in-drone-strike-haryana-youth-who-went-to-russia-for-better-life-cremated-10334890/>.

¹¹⁰ Truth Hounds interview with a prisoner of war from Nepal, Lviv Region, Ukraine, October 3, 2025.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

[The Indian nationals] said that Nepali people would not be sent to the frontlines. The training would just be about five to six months... They said that the army was paying 300,000 [Russian] rubles [approximately US\$3,200].¹¹²

He signed a Russian-language contract, agreeing to join the Russian military. Explaining how his experience in the Russian military did not match his understanding of what he agreed to, he said:

The contract was in Russian. I did not understand what was written in the contract, and I fell for the things as others were saying: that there would be a [salary] of 300,000 Russian rubles [approximately US\$3,200]. ... [A]fter we were declared fit for war, [the Russian commanders] took everything from me. I had my phone that I had brought from Nepal... They even took my passport, and I had two passports with me. One was an old passport, and I had one new passport¹¹³

The man realized his mistake while attending military training, saying: "One day [a Russian] commander showed me and a Nepali friend a briefing that [said] a lot of Nepalese people were killed in Mariupol. After seeing it, I didn't even want to touch the weapon. I was very scared. I just wanted to go home."¹¹⁴

He further shared how there was not an option to leave, saying:

During this time, there were 15 to 20 Indians and Nepali, my brothers... Many were injured. They were planning to escape, and they said that if we are going to escape further, you should also try to escape. But I could not escape because I did not have any money and many of my friends were injured.¹¹⁵

A conflict with his commander led to several beatings and the confiscation of his Nepali bank cards, mobile phone, tablet, and passport. He only managed to hold onto a Russian bank card, issued by one of the largest banks in Russia, but the account had no funds.

Despite asking to be sent home, the Russian military instead deployed him to what he had been told was a training operation. There, he found himself on the battlefield, where he was injured and subsequently captured by the Ukrainian army.¹¹⁶

Sri Lankan nationals shared similar experiences of being transferred into the Russian Armed Forces.¹¹⁷ In 2024, police in Sri Lanka arrested two retired generals of the Sri Lankan army and six others involved in recruiting fighters for the Russian Armed Forces.¹¹⁸

Truth Hounds interviewed two Sri Lankan prisoners of war in Ukraine. One of them said he traveled to Russia for work after being unemployed in Sri Lanka. He worked at a fast food restaurant for a year before his visa expired. He then joined other Sri Lankans in

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ "The 'Duped' Sri Lankans Fighting in Russia's Ukraine War," *Agence France-Press*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

signing a contract with the Russian army. The man explained, "I went and signed the contract myself. I lived in Russia for two and a half years, and then I needed documents. I had no documents at all. And wanted to get Russian citizenship."¹¹⁹

After one-and-a-half months of military training, the Russian Army sent him to an assault battalion, where he participated in several operations. Unlike others interviewed, this man received several payments for his service in the Russian Army, which he sent home to his relatives. Before being captured by the Ukrainian Army, he participated in several assault operations. He also explored obtaining Russian citizenship and was told he could receive it within six months, but this did not happen.¹²⁰

Another Sri Lankan prisoner of war with 22 years' experience in the Sri Lankan Naval Fleet told Truth Hounds that he paid US\$500 to a Sri Lankan broker, who arranged a tourist visa to Russia. He traveled to Russia with two other men on March 28, 2024. Upon his arrival to Moscow, he joined 20 other Sri Lankans.

"I flew from Sri Lanka to Bahrain, and it was one night there. After, we were in transit, then we flew to Moscow," the man said. After they arrived, Russian-speaking brokers took the men to another location. He said, "They just took our blood for testing, and there we signed a contract and opened a bank account, and on April 2, [2025], we were brought to a military location. ... The contract was completely in Russian. It was a small sheet, like a leaflet, that size. There was some information in Sinhala language."¹²¹

He told Truth Hounds that Singalese information stated that he would receive monthly payments of 195,000 rubles [around US\$2,500] plus a one-time payment of 200,000 rubles [around US\$2,600]. However, the leaflet did not indicate his duties in the army.

He said he went to Russia to join the army, emphasizing economic challenges in Sri Lanka and the need to support his family. Although he knew about the ongoing war with Ukraine, the man told Truth Hounds that he had been promised he would not be engaged in the fighting directly or be sent to the frontlines and instead would be providing some services to the civilian population in the Russian-occupied territories.¹²²

My main goal was to find work [in Russia], and after I arrived, [the Russian brokers] told me that they could help me with work and citizenship, and, naturally, [the Russians] promised that they would not send me to frontline cities. [They told me that I would be] only providing some services.¹²³

Despite this, the Russian Army deployed him into combat with only a bottle of water. There he was wounded and captured by the Ukrainian army.

Indian nationals have also reportedly fought for Russia. In 2025, Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War said they were aware of 111 Indians who were recruited to fight for Russia.¹²⁴ In 2024, India successfully negotiated the withdrawal of its citizens from combat zones, with Russia facilitating their return home.

¹¹⁹ Truth Hounds interview with a prisoner of war from Sri Lanka in a prisoner of war camp, Lviv Region, Ukraine, October 1, 2025.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ "Hochu Zhyt Project," Telegram.

This was due to sustained pressure by New Delhi and political leverage. India's success may be due to its position as a major buyer of Russian oil and has close military ties to Russia.¹²⁵ In contrast, the governments of Sri Lanka and Nepal have tried and failed to secure from Russia the return of its citizens.¹²⁶

However, in October 2025, the Indian government stated that the illicit recruitment of Indian citizens to the Russian army resumed, and the Ukraine Army captured Indian fighters in the Russian Army in 2025.¹²⁷ According to the Indian press, at least seven Indian nationals underwent a 15-day military training with the Russian Army in August 2025, and at least eight Indian nationals in the Russian Army went missing in September, 2025. In October 2025, two families received the bodies of their sons, returned from Russia.¹²⁸

Governments throughout South Asia, including in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, have arrested brokers linked to trafficking networks of men transferred into the Russian Army.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Alex Travelli, "How India Became One of the Biggest Buyers of Russian Oil," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/31/business/india-russia-oil-trump.html>. Furthermore, Vitaly Matvienko from the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War in Ukraine said about India: "A case in point is India. In 2024, Russia was actively recruiting Indian citizens to participate in the war. However, in the summer of that year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave Putin an ultimatum: immediately release all recruited Indians, return them to their homeland, and stop recruiting them," Matviyenko recalls. "Russia understands the language of force well and complied with this demand. Already in September 2024, the Indian Foreign Ministry announced the return of the first 45 citizens. In 2025, we no longer record cases of Indian citizens signing contracts with the Russian Armed Forces." See, "Казахстанец уехал на работу в Россию, попал на войну и погиб в 21 год: 'Сказали, что он будет на учениях, а отправили на передовую'" [A Kazakhstani Went to Work in Russia, Ended up in the War and Died at 21], *Current Time*, August 4, 2025, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kazakhstanets-rabota-v-rossiyu-popal-na-voynuu-pogib/33490853.html>.

¹²⁶ Although the recruitment of Nepali citizens to the Russian army almost stopped in 2025. Sharma, "Nepal Halts Work Permits for Russia, Ukraine After Soldiers Killed," *Reuters* and "Sri Lanka says Russia to Stop Recruiting Fighters from the Island," *Agence France-Presse*, June 11, 2024. See also, Statement of Dmytro Usov, Secretary of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, "The Third International Conference "Crimea Global. Understanding Ukraine Through the South" | Day 2.

¹²⁷ Journalist Umashankar Singh's Facebook page, "Briefing of an official of the Ministry of External Affairs of India," September 27, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19z1qunMKd/>; "The 63rd Separate Mechanized Brigade," Telegram, October 7, 2025, https://t.me/ombr_63/1379; Keshav Padmanabhan, "India Seeks Consular Access for Russian PoW in Ukraine Custody. But His Potential R is Complicated," *The Print*.

¹²⁸ Sukhbir Siwach, "Killed in Drone Strike, Haryana Youth Who Went to Russia for 'Better Life' Cremated," *The Indian Express*.

¹²⁹ Dayal and Kaushik, "India says it Uncovers Trafficking Racket Duping People into Fighting for Russia in Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 8, 2024; Parajuli and Ng "Nepal: Twelve Arrested for Smuggling Nepalis into Russian Army," *BBC*, December 7, 2023, and "The 'Duped' Sri Lankans Fighting in Russia's Ukraine War," *Agence France-Presse*.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

This chapter looks at the responses of the governments of Bangladesh, Ukraine, and Russia to the forced recruitment of foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces.

BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Bangladeshi authorities have taken some steps to crack down on human trafficking rings involved in transporting Bangladeshi workers to Russia under false pretenses and transferring them into the Russian Armed Forces. For example, in June 2025, Bangladesh’s Criminal Investigation Department arrested Muhammad Alamgir Hossain for allegedly trafficking Bangladeshi men to Russia under false promises of high-paying jobs.¹³⁰

Speaking about Bangladesh’s efforts to address the human trafficking of Bangladeshis to Russia, Mostafizur Rahman, an Assistant Police Superintendent in the anti-trafficking unit of the Bangladesh police, told Fortify Rights in October 2025:

Our investigations require close coordination with local police, the Foreign Ministry, and Bangladesh missions abroad. These agencies maintain strong collaboration and coordination with us, and as a result of all of our coordinated effort, Russia is not taking Bangladeshis to fight Ukraine at the moment. ... [O]ur government agencies and services providers, in this regard, fully support them. To prevent these trafficking

¹³⁰ “Bangladeshis Trafficked to Russia and Forced into War with Ukraine, Says CID,” *BD News 24*, June 14, 2025, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/af8165b4460a?utm>.

operations, I recommend expediting the formal channels so people can migrate in legal ways, besides stronger monitoring of travel agencies, proper licensing under BMET [Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training], public awareness campaigns, and better inter-agency coordination between police, immigration, the foreign ministry, and labor authorities. Trafficking networks are increasingly sophisticated, involving fake visas, online promises, and international coordination.¹³¹

In January 2026, Mohammad Badrul Alam Molla, the Special Superintendent of the Human Trafficking Unit of the Bangladesh Police told Fortify Rights:

A dedicated mechanism has been established within the CID's [Criminal Investigation Department] anti-human trafficking framework to specifically address cases linked to Russia. This was necessary because some Bangladeshis were being pushed in the Ukraine war, making the issue highly sensitive. As a result, verification procedures for travel routes used to send people to Russia have been tightened, and movement through suspicious channels is now more closely restricted. ... A specialized team operates from an office at the airport to collect information from Bangladeshis returning from Russia. These returnees are interviewed to determine how they travelled, who facilitated their journey, and what kind of work they were actually made to do.¹³²

He continued:

Through tighter verification, airport-level screening, inter-agency coordination, and public awareness initiatives, the government has significantly reduced the flow of Bangladeshis being trafficked to Russia. While investigations continue and some networks remain active, authorities believe the situation is now largely under control and are focused on preventing any resurgence.¹³³

Fortify Rights documented the engagement of members of Bangladesh's diplomatic community to support the repatriations of Bangladeshi survivors trafficked into the Russian Armed Forces. For example, one survivor, Mohan Miajee, described how Bangladesh authorities helped facilitate his return to Bangladesh after he escaped the Russian military. He said:

I went to the Bangladesh consulate in Russia and told them the whole story of being tricked to fight and not being able to leave. They issued me a travel document and supported my return to Bangladesh. They also bought a flight ticket for me. I paid the Bangladesh consulate money to send me back. It was funds for the flight ticket and other expenses.¹³⁴

However, his brother shared how he felt Bangladesh authorities could do more to protect Bangladeshis in Russia. He said:

¹³¹ Fortify Rights interview with Z.I., Bangladesh, October 30, 2025. Mostafizur Rahman told *Associated Press* that about 40 Bangladeshis may have lost their lives in the war. See, Kullab, "Workers from Bangladesh sought jobs in Russia but instead got sent to combat in Ukraine," *Associated Press*. This is higher than the number given by the Ukrainian Coordination Headquarters which stated that as of September 2025 there were 36 Bangladeshi citizens who died in the frontlines.

¹³² Fortify Rights interview with A.D., Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 31, 2026.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., Bangladesh, August 1, 2025.

Individuals are in danger in Russia; the government of Bangladesh should have taken significant action to assist them, had it been willing to do so. However, they failed to take any steps in this matter. When migrant workers, who are vital sources of remittances, find themselves in peril abroad, it is the government's responsibility to intervene.¹³⁵

Several families also reported challenges with obtaining the bodies of relatives killed while with the Russian military, despite engaging the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bangladesh for support.¹³⁶ "I want my son's dead body returned to Bangladesh from Russia," the father of Ahmed, not his real name, who was reportedly killed serving with the Russian Armed Forces, told Fortify Rights. "I have requested the foreign ministry to return my son."¹³⁷

At the time of writing, Ahmed's body has not been returned to Bangladesh.

To the knowledge of Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds, Russia has not repatriated any bodies of Bangladeshi men killed while fighting with the Russian armed forces.

UKRAINE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War and the Office of the Prosecutor General are the main agencies involved in dealing with foreign fighters engaged with the Russian Armed Forces captured or found in Ukraine. Ukraine recognizes such captured foreign fighters as prisoners of war, rather than "mercenaries," and they are provided treatment similar to that afforded to captured Russian fighters.¹³⁸ Such an approach prevents the prosecution of foreign fighters as mercenaries. Foreign fighters together with the Russian prisoners of war are held in specially designated prisoner of war camps, which operate within established international standards with regular visits from international institutions, such as the U.N. and International Committee of the Red Cross.¹³⁹ There is also an established practice of consular visits to the prisoners of war camp, including among South Asian countries.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Fortify Rights interview with Z.G., Bangladesh, August 14, 2025.

¹³⁶ Over the years Bangladeshi people have been rescued and brought back successfully after being trapped by smugglers and traffickers. For example, in 2024, reportedly with support from the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Wage Earners' Welfare Board 81 Bangladeshis were safely brought back home from various countries. See, "Bangladeshis Top Mediterranean Crossings to Italy Amid Rising Trafficking Dangers," *The Business Standard*, July 29, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladeshis-top-mediterranean-crossings-italy-amid-rising-trafficking-dangers-1199996>.

¹³⁷ Fortify Rights interview with Z.D., Bangladesh, August 2, 2025.

¹³⁸ Truth Hounds communication with the investigator from the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, Ukraine, June 25, 2025. In December 2025, the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War confirmed with Truth Hounds that Ukraine was not holding any citizens of Bangladesh as prisoners of war; however, Ukraine was holding prisoners of war from Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and other countries. Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, December 2025.

¹³⁹ "На території України наразі розташовані п'ять таборів для утримання полонених" [On The Territory Of Ukraine, There Are Five Camps For Crisoners], *Ukrinform*, February 4, 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3956368-na-teritorii-ukraini-narazi-roztasovani-pat-taboriv-dla-utrimanna-polonenih.html>; Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], *Treatment Of Prisoners Of War And Update On The Human Rights In Ukraine*, October 1, 2024, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-10-01%20OHCHR%2040th%20periodic%20report%20on%20Ukraine.pdf>.

¹⁴⁰ Truth Hounds communication with the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, Ukraine, December 2025.

Typically, Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General—the highest prosecutorial authority in Ukraine, responsible for maintaining public prosecution in court, procedural management of pre-trial investigations, and supervision of law enforcement officers—will interview prisoners of war as witnesses within the investigation of Russian aggression against Ukraine.¹⁴¹ Their status may also change to that of “suspect” if there are grounds to believe that they committed an international crime, such as a war crime.¹⁴²

Prisoner-of-war status traditionally provides for repatriation to the state on which the person depends — in this context, the Russian Federation. Although prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia occur regularly, the Coordination Headquarters reported that Russia generally does not request the return of foreign nationals.¹⁴³

While Russia is not facilitating the return of foreign prisoners of war, such repatriation could expose them to renewed military deployment and further human rights violations. Some foreign prisoners of war, interviewed by Truth Hounds, expressed fear of being returned to Russia and redeployed to the frontlines.¹⁴⁴ However, some expressed a desire to return to Russia in order to receive payment for participation in hostilities and the possibility to obtain a Russian passport.¹⁴⁵ Others expressed fear of being returned to their home country due to the threat of prosecution for participating in the war or engaging in mercenary activities.¹⁴⁶

Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policies, National Police, and the Office of the Prosecutor General are responsible for preventing and investigating crimes related to human trafficking and providing support to survivors.¹⁴⁷ According to the information obtained by Truth Hounds, cases involving prisoners of war are not currently being considered or investigated as potential cases of human trafficking in Ukraine.¹⁴⁸

On January 28, 2026, Truth Hounds raised the issue of foreign prisoners of war in Ukraine, some of whom may be victims of human trafficking, during a meeting of the Interagency Working Group on the Detection, Suppression, and Investigation of Crimes Related to Human Trafficking in Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ The Working Group agreed to bring the issue of investigating human trafficking among foreign prisoners of war before the specialized unit of the Office of the Prosecutor General, namely Department for Organization of Procedural Management of Pre-trial Investigation and Support of Public Prosecution in Criminal Proceedings Related to Human Trafficking.

¹⁴¹ Truth Hounds communication with an investigator from the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, June 25, 2025.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ North Korean prisoners of war—who represent North Korea and not the Russian Army—are one exception to the general exclusion of foreign nationals in prisoner exchanges. Rather, the Russian Federation and South Korea both request the return of North Korean prisoners of war. Statement of Dmytro Usov, Secretary of the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of the Prisoners of War, “The Third International Conference “Crimea Global. Understanding Ukraine Through the South” | Day 2.

¹⁴⁴ Truth Hounds interview with prisoners of war in two prisoners of war camps in Lviv region, Ukraine, October 2025.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ For further information on Ukraine's national system for preventing human trafficking, see, the International Organization for Migration, Ukraine, website, <https://ukraine.iom.int/uk/derzhavna-systema-protydyi-torhivli-lyudmy-v-ukrayini>.

¹⁴⁸ Truth Hounds communication with the representative of the Office of the Prosecutor General, Ukraine, November 2025.

¹⁴⁹ More information about the Working Group, see, the Office of the Prosecutor General, website: <https://gp.gov.ua/en/posts/30-lipnya-vseshviti-den-protidii-torgivli-lyudmi>.

RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Russia continues to aggressively recruit foreign fighters to serve in its military campaign in Ukraine and appears to be complicit in trafficking networks that coerce or deceive foreigners into joining Russia's military.

In direct contradiction to the findings documented by Truth Hounds and Fortify Rights, the Embassy of Russia in Bangladesh claimed in 2022 that it had received numerous letters from Bangladeshi citizens expressing their willingness to contribute to the war with Ukraine on an "unpaid basis," describing it as a "noble urge of the Bangladeshi people." In the same statement, the embassy noted that "there is no need for volunteers from Bangladesh to join the operation" as the so-called "special military operation" was successful.¹⁵⁰

Truth Hounds and Fortify Rights were unable to confirm or refute these claims. However, notably, none of the Bangladeshi nationals interviewed for this report indicated ideological motivations for joining the Russian military.

Beginning in 2023 and continuing into 2024 and 2025, brokers increasingly recruited and transported Bangladeshi men to Russia.¹⁵¹ A review of publicly available information did not identify any official statements from the Embassy of Russia in Bangladesh addressing allegations of trafficking or recruitment of Bangladeshi nationals into the Russian armed forces.

There is no indication that the Russian government has taken any steps to end or investigate such abuses; evidence suggests Russian involvement in the recruiting and transferring of foreign fighters to the frontlines.

This pattern of denial is not confined to Bangladesh. Speaking in October 2025 about the recruitment of Indian men into the Russian Armed Forces, Russian Ambassador to India Denis Alipov stated that recruitment agencies are to blame, as well as Indians themselves whom he claimed show up to the recruitment centers voluntarily. The Russian Ambassador to India Denis Alipov said: "We have from the very start stressed that to the Indian government, that the Russian Army does not recruit Indians. ...If a foreigner comes to a recruiting center and signs the contract voluntarily, ...nobody makes him sign that contract."¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Embassy of Russia in Bangladesh, "About the Volunteers from Bangladesh Who Wish to Join the Russian Special Military Operation," April 2, 2022, https://web.facebook.com/rusembdhaka/photos/about-the-volunteers-from-bangladesh-who-wish-to-join-the-russian-special-milita/349184230583033/?_rdc=1&_rdt. See also, "No Need for Bangladeshi Volunteers to Join Military Operation in Ukraine: Russian Embassy," *The Daily Star*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/2022-russian-invasion-ukraine/news/no-need-bangladeshi-volunteers-join-military-operation-ukraine-russian-embassy-3000226>.

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Kullab, "Workers from Bangladesh Sought Jobs in Russia but Instead Got Sent to Combat in Ukraine," Associated Press; Hridoy and Aziz, "Migrant Worker Forced to Fight for Russia Killed in Drone Attack," *The Daily Star* and Anjuman, "Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia's War," *Deutsche Welle*.

¹⁵² Keshav Padmanabhan, "Stopped Recruiting Indians for Russian Military, Some Who Remain There are Russian Citizens, Says Envoy," *The Print*, October 29, 2025, <https://theprint.in/off-the-cuff/stopped-recruiting-indians-for-russian-military-some-who-remain-there-are-russian-citizens-says-envoy/2772848/>.

Although the Russian government agreed to withdraw and repatriate Indian fighters following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Moscow in 2024, less than a year later, Indian nationals were again reported to be present in the Russian military.¹⁵³ Explaining the situation, Russian Ambassador to India Denis Alipov noted: "The problem we have now is that some of the Indians still serving in the Russian Army—not only in Ukraine but elsewhere—have acquired Russian citizenship. They are now Russian citizens of Indian origin."¹⁵⁴

In some exceptional cases, Russia reportedly provided compensation to the families of those Indian and Nepalese citizens who died on the frontlines.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Rezaul H. Laskar, "85 Indians Discharged from Russian Army, India Working for Release of 20 More," *Hindustan Times*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/85-indians-discharged-from-russian-army-india-working-for-release-of-20-more-101729523715856.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Padmanabhan, "Stopped Recruiting Indians For Russian Military, Some Who Remain There Are Russian Citizens, Says Envoy," *The Print*, and Laskar, "85 Indians Discharged from Russian Army, India Working for Release of 20 More," *Hindustan Times*.

¹⁵⁵ Pia Krishnankutty "Contractual Obligations': Russia Offers Compensation to Families of Indians Killed in War," *The Print*, July 10, 2024, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/contractual-obligations-russia-offers-compensation-to-families-of-indians-killed-in-war/2168629/>; Anil Giri, "Russia to Compensate Nepali War Dead via Moscow Embassy," *Kathmandu Post*, February 14, 2024, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/02/14/russia-to-compensate-nepali-war-dead-via-moscow-embassy>.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYSIS

This report applies treaty-based and customary law frameworks of international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, to examine the legal implications of the recruitment and deployment of Bangladeshi nationals into the Russian armed forces in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

The evidence documented in this report, including survivor testimony, family accounts, and official records and statements, indicates a pattern of deceptive recruitment, transnational movement, coercion, and exploitation through forced military service, including deployment to front-line combat roles. These acts, taken together, support the conclusion that many of the documented cases may amount to human trafficking, including trafficking for the purpose of forced services and, in some circumstances, conditions indicative of servitude or practices similar to slavery.

THE APPLICABLE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

International Humanitarian Law

Under Common Articles 2 and 3 of the Geneva Conventions, two types of armed conflicts are discernible: international armed conflicts and non-international armed conflicts.¹⁵⁶ Common Article 2 of the Geneva Conventions outlines situations when an international armed conflict exists, including cases of declared war, armed conflict between States—even if one State does not recognize the state of war, and partial or total occupation of another State's territory, even if the occupation meets with no armed resistance.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, adopted August 12, 1949, G.A. Res. 310(IV), U.N. Doc. A/1251 (1949), Common Art. 2 and 3.

¹⁵⁷ Geneva Convention I, II, III, and IV, Art. 2.

The armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine qualifies as an international armed conflict.¹⁵⁸ It began in 2014, when Russia invaded and occupied Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and seized control over parts of eastern Ukraine through subordinate separatist administrations over which Russia exercised effective control.¹⁵⁹ Since February 24, 2022, Russia has carried out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including widespread attacks and the occupation of additional Ukrainian territories.¹⁶⁰ As an international armed conflict, the conflict is governed by the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I, including rules governing combatant status and treatment of prisoners of war.¹⁶¹

The context of an international armed conflict prohibits the criminal prosecution of lawful combatants merely for their involvement in the conflict if that involvement is in line with the laws of war and other international legal standards.¹⁶² Captured combatants also enjoy protective status as prisoners of war in the context of an international armed conflict.¹⁶³ In line with international humanitarian law, Ukrainian authorities classify and treat all captured servicemen of the Russian Federation, including foreign fighters, as prisoners of war.¹⁶⁴

International Human Rights Law

Alongside international humanitarian law, international human rights law also applies during armed conflict. International human rights law includes the prohibition of human trafficking, slavery, and servitude, as reflected in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol), which

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* As the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine is the case of armed conflict between the Parties as well as the case of partial occupation of the territory of a Party.

¹⁵⁹ U.N. General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 March 2014, Territorial integrity of Ukraine*, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262, April 1, 2014, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/262>; U.N. General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018, Problem of the Militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov*, U.N. Doc A/RES/73/194, January 23, 2019, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/451/02/pdf/n1845102.pdf>; U.N. General Assembly, *Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 9 December 2019, Problem of the Militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov*, U.N. Doc A/RES/74/17, December 13, 2019, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/74/17>; and *Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia*, European Court for Human Rights (ECHR), Case Nos. 8019/16, 43800/14 and 28525/20, Decision on Admissibility (Grand Chamber), adopted November 30, 2022, delivered January 25, 2023, paras. 690–697.

¹⁶⁰ U.N. General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 2 March 2022, Aggression against Ukraine*, U.N. Doc. A/RES/ES-11/1, March 18, 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/ES-11/1>. See also, OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, August 1, 2022 – 31 January 2023*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2023/23-03-24-Ukraine-35th-periodic-report-ENG.pdf>; OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, March 2024 – May 31, 2024*, July 3, 2024, <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/24-07-03%20OHCHR%2039th%20periodic%20report%20on%20Ukraine.pdf>; OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 September – November 30, 2024*, December 31, 2024, <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/PR41%20Ukraine%202024-12-31.pdf>; Institute for the Study of War, *Interactive Time-lapse: Russia's War in Ukraine*, website, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/733fe90805894bfc8562d90b106aa895>.

¹⁶¹ Geneva Conventions I, II, III, and IV; Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), adopted June 8, 1977, G.A. Res. 32/44, U.N. Doc. A/32/144 (1977).

¹⁶² International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Immunities" *How Does Law Protect in War?*, February 21, 2026, https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/immunities.

¹⁶³ Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention), adopted August 12, 1949, G.A. Res. 310(IV), U.N. Doc. A/1251 (1949), Art. 4(A).

¹⁶⁴ See, "Ukraine Government Response" section of this report.

supplements the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.¹⁶⁵ Russia is a party to the Palermo Protocol, which requires States Parties to criminalize human trafficking, protect victims, and cooperate internationally to prevent and combat trafficking.¹⁶⁶

The Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking through three cumulative elements: (1) an act i.e recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons; (2) means such as deception, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, or fraud; and (3) purpose of exploitation, including forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, and servitude.¹⁶⁷ Importantly, under the Palermo Protocol, consent is legally irrelevant where any of the prohibited “means” are used.¹⁶⁸

The Status of Foreign Fighters Under International Humanitarian Law

Article 43 of Additional Protocol I defines combatants as members of the armed forces, and members of militias or volunteer corps forming part of such armed forces.¹⁶⁹ Combatant status grants the right to participate directly in hostilities, and when captured by the adverse party, a combatant is entitled to prisoner of war status.¹⁷⁰ A core protection attached to prisoner of war status is immunity from prosecution for lawful acts of war, including direct participation in hostilities.¹⁷¹

Importantly, a person’s nationality does not determine combatant or prisoner of war status. The International Committee of the Red Cross—the main guardian of international humanitarian law with a mandate from states to protect and assist victims of armed conflict—has emphasized that: “[T]he fact that an individual is a national of a third State and not a national of the armed forces in which they are serving (nor a national of the adversary) is widely considered to be irrelevant when it comes to determining prisoner-of-war status.”¹⁷² Accordingly, Bangladeshi nationals and other foreigners integrated into the Russian armed forces are not excluded from combatant status and, consequently, prisoner of war status, just because of their foreign nationality.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁵ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol), adopted November 15, 2000, G.A. Res. 55/25, U.N. Doc. A/55/383 (2000), https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18.

¹⁶⁶ Palermo Protocol, Arts. 5–9 (criminalization, protection, prevention, cooperation).

¹⁶⁷ *Id.* at Art. 3(a) (definition of trafficking in persons).

¹⁶⁸ *Id.* at Art. 3(b) (consent of a victim is irrelevant where any of the “means” are used).

¹⁶⁹ Additional Protocol I, Art. 43; Geneva Convention III, Art. 4.

¹⁷⁰ Additional Protocol I, Article 44 (1).

¹⁷¹ *Id.* at Article 43 (2); International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Protected Persons: Prisoners of War and Detainees*, October 29, 2010, <https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/protected-persons-prisoners-war-and-detainees>.

¹⁷² International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Commentary of 2020: Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Article 4*, January 1, 2020, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949/article-4/commentary/2020>; Hersch Lauterpacht (ed.), *Oppenheim’s International Law*, 7th edition, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1952, p. 255: ‘It is likewise irrelevant to consider the composition of a regular army, whether it is based on conscription or not, whether foreigners as well as subjects are enrolled, and the like.’

¹⁷³ Despite this, in March 2022, Russia officially proclaimed “[N]one of the mercenaries the West is sending to Ukraine to fight for the nationalist regime in Kyiv can be considered as combatants in accordance with international humanitarian law or enjoy the status of prisoners of war.” This statement was put into

International humanitarian law also distinguishes mercenaries, who are excluded from combatant and prisoner of war status under Additional Protocol I.¹⁷⁴ Article 47 sets a narrow, cumulative definition requiring that six conditions be met, including that the person is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict.¹⁷⁵ In practice, since 2023, foreign nationals fighting for Russia must sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense, which places them within Russia's armed forces as a matter of international humanitarian law status, even if they were recruited through abusive means.¹⁷⁶

This distinction is legally significant. First, the fact that a person is treated as a lawful combatant or prisoner of war when captured does not mean the person voluntarily joined the armed forces or was not victimized. Second, combatant status under international humanitarian law does not preclude recognition of trafficking under international human rights law: a person may be entitled to prisoner of war protections upon capture while also being a survivor of human trafficking, depending on how they were recruited, transferred, and exploited.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

The evidence documented in this report indicates that many Bangladeshi nationals were recruited and moved through transnational networks under false promises of civilian employment and then compelled into Russian military service, including deployment to front-line combat roles in Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine. These cases align closely with the Palermo Protocol definition of trafficking in persons, particularly trafficking for the purpose of forced services and, in some cases, conditions indicative of servitude.

The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in persons through three elements:

- *Act*: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons;
- *Means*: the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments to obtain control over a person; and
- *Purpose*: exploitation, including forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery or servitude.¹⁷⁷

action soon afterwards: in June 2022, a court in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine sentenced to death three western foreign fighters after being accused of being mercenaries. The practice has not changed over time, as in 2025 Russia continued labelling foreigners as mercenaries, denying them prisoners of war status. See, Jason Lemon, "Russia Vows Prosecution of Foreign Fighters After 16K Join Ukraine," March 3, 2022, *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-vows-prosecution-foreign-fighters-after-16k-join-ukraine-1684671>; Dan Bilefsky and Valerie Hopkins, "Foreign Fighters Sentenced to Death in Russia-Held Eastern Ukraine," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/world/europe/ukraine-army-death-sentence-russia.html>. See also, Shannon Bosch, "Russia is Labelling Oscar Jenkins a 'Mercenary', Not a Prisoner of War. What's the Difference - and Why Does this Matter?" *The Conversation*, May 19, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/russia-is-labelling-oscar-jenkins-a-mercenary-not-a-prisoner-of-war-whats-the-difference-and-why-does-this-matter-256996>.

¹⁷⁴ Additional Protocol I, Art. 43 (2); International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Protected Persons: Prisoners of War and Detainees*.

¹⁷⁵ Additional Protocol I, Art. 47.

¹⁷⁶ Roman Petrenko, "Russian Defence Minister Forces All Mercenary Groups to Sign Contract with Russian MoD; Wagner Group's Chief Refuses," *Ukrainska Pravda*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/11/7406364/>.

¹⁷⁷ Palermo Protocol, Art. 3 (a).

Consent is legally irrelevant where any of the prohibited “means” are used.¹⁷⁸

This legal framework is particularly relevant to the documented experiences of Bangladeshi men who sought overseas employment but were instead diverted—through deception and abuse of vulnerability—into military service and front-line deployment. As a State Party to the Palermo Protocol, Russia has legal obligations to prevent trafficking, investigate and prosecute perpetrators, protect victims of trafficking, and cooperate internationally.¹⁷⁹ The evidence documented by Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds indicates systemic failures to meet these obligations.

The “Act” Element: Recruitment, Transportation, Transfer, Harboring, or Receipt

The report documents repeated acts consistent with trafficking, including recruitment of Bangladeshi men by brokers and agencies with promises of overseas employment; transportation and transfer across borders—often through third countries such as Saudi Arabia to avoid Bangladeshi government scrutiny and anti-trafficking regulations—before entry into Russia; and receipt of individuals by intermediaries or officials upon arrival to Russia, followed by movement into military training and deployment structures.¹⁸⁰ These acts fall squarely within the Palermo Protocol’s definition of human trafficking.¹⁸¹

The “Means” Element: Deception, Fraud, Coercion, and Abuse of Vulnerability

The “means” element is established through recurring features in the documented cases. For example, Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds documented how brokers deceived Bangladeshi and other Asian recruits with regard to the nature of their employment, their ultimate destinations, and the content of the contracts they signed.¹⁸² Several men reported being promised civilian jobs—such as factory work, cleaning, cooking, or electrician work.¹⁸³ In some cases, they were told that they would be traveling onward to Europe, only to find themselves routed into Russia and pressured into signing military contracts in Russian.¹⁸⁴ Survivors and relatives described signing Russian-language documents that they could not understand, later discovering these were military

¹⁷⁸ Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(b).

¹⁷⁹ Palermo Protocol, Art. 4.

¹⁸⁰ Bangladeshi authorities have increased monitoring of potential trafficking of Bangladeshi men into Russia. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Rafiqul Alam in February 2025: “Given the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, we have requested relevant authorities to exercise special caution at international airports for Bangladeshi citizens traveling to Russia on a tourist visa or with valid Russian visas in their passport.” See, “Government Advises Bangladeshis Caught in Russia-Ukraine War to Contact Embassy in Moscow,” *BD News 24*, February 9, 2025, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/36b36a16c6ba>.

¹⁸¹ Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(a).

¹⁸² Fortify Rights interview with Z.A., Bangladesh, May 31, 2025. See also, “Bangladesh Families Seek Sons Feared Fighting for Russia,” *France 24*, April 11, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250411-bangladesh-families-seek-sons-feared-fighting-for-russia>.

¹⁸³ Fortify Rights interview with Z.A., Bangladesh, May 31, 2025. Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., Bangladesh, August 1, 2025. See also, Anjuman, “Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia’s War,” *Deutsche Well*.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

enlistment contracts.¹⁸⁵ This undermines any claim of informed consent and reflects a common trafficking tactic: securing signatures under conditions designed to conceal the true purpose of recruitment.

The individuals targeted by brokers were largely in situations of economic precarity, debt, and lacked secure employment or access to reliable migration pathways, creating a dependency on the brokers. Their lack of Russian language skills and unfamiliarity with the environment in Russia further heightened their vulnerability, which increased their reliance on intermediaries who exploited that dependence.¹⁸⁶ The Palermo Protocol explicitly recognizes abuse of vulnerability as a “means” of trafficking.¹⁸⁷

Several testimonies indicate that Bangladeshi men who were transferred into the Russian Armed Forces could not leave their unit or escape once assigned to military service. Some men told Fortify Rights that brokers had confiscated their passports and other documents.¹⁸⁸ Any deserters caught attempting to flee the Russian Armed Forces also face severe retaliation, including the possibility of immediate execution by Russian officers.¹⁸⁹ Such practices are well-recognized mechanisms of coercive methods used to control trafficking victims.

Under the Palermo Protocol, any consent obtained through deception or fraud, abuse of vulnerability, or coercion, or is not considered consent and does not negate trafficking.¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, the existence of signed contracts cannot be treated as proof of voluntary enlistment in cases where the surrounding circumstances show that the signatures were procured through deceptive or coercive means. This includes contracts signed by individuals who do not understand the language and are not provided with accurate interpretation or translation.

¹⁸⁵ Fortify Rights interview with Z.F., Bangladesh, September 27, 2025.

¹⁸⁶ Jean Allain, *The Law and Slavery: Prohibiting Human Exploitation*, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden/Boston, 2015, pp. 350–351.

¹⁸⁷ Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(a).

¹⁸⁸ Shahadat Hossain, “How Middlemen Recruit Bangladeshi Youth for Russia-Ukraine War,” *Prothom Alo*, April 22, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/cad77mqdzu>; Murali Krishnan, “Russia-Ukraine: Indian Recruits Share ‘Frightening’ Ordeal,” *Deutsche Welle*, 02/11/2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-ukraine-indian-recruits-share-frightening-ordeal/a-71562381>; “How Were Indians Duped into Fighting for Russia in the Ukraine War?,” *Reuters*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/how-were-indians-duped-into-fighting-russia-ukraine-war-2024-07-09/>; Vipul Kumar and Neel Madhav, “Dead, Trapped and Waiting to Escape: Meet the Indians Forced to Fight Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” *The Wire*, August 26, /2024, <https://thewire.in/news/dead-trapped-and-waiting-to-escape-meet-the-indians-forced-to-fight-russias-war-against-ukraine>; Ashraf Padanna, “Ukraine War: The Indian Men Traumatized by Fighting for Russia,” *BBC*, April 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-68767470>.

¹⁸⁹ There are credible reports that Russian forces have severely punished soldiers who attempt to desert or retreat from frontline positions. The *New York Times* in 2025, reported that family members of Russian soldiers filed more than 6,000 confidential complaints alleging abuse within Russia’s military ranks, including harsh treatment of those who resisted deployment or attempted to leave combat roles. See, Paul Sonne, Anton Troianovski, Milana Mazaeva, Nataliya Vasilyeva and Alina Lobzina, “How Russia’s War Machine Brutalizes and Exploits Its Own Soldiers,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/12/31/world/europe/russia-military-abuse-soldiers.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>. Under Article 338 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, desertion is punishable by imprisonment for up to seven years and desertion with weapons entrusted for service or desertion committed by a group of persons by prior agreement or by an organized group is punishable by imprisonment for up to ten years. See, Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, No. 63-FZ of June 13, 1996, Art. 338(1)–(2).

¹⁹⁰ Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(b).

The “Purpose” Element: Exploitation Through Forced Services in Armed Conflict

The “purpose” element is established through the demonstration that the recruitment and transfer of Bangladeshi men was exploitative, aimed at forcing the men to join the Russian Armed Forces and provide military services, including on the frontlines.¹⁹¹ Specifically, Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds documented how Bangladeshi men were compelled to engage in weapons training, deployed to frontline combat zones, and exposed to life-threatening conditions from which they could not freely withdraw. The Palermo Protocol explicitly includes “forced labour or services” and “servitude” among trafficking purposes.

While some legal frameworks exclude “service of a military character” from the definition of forced labor—for example, the International Forced Labour Convention and its Protocol, addressing conscription—trafficking-in-persons law contains no blanket exclusion for military exploitation.¹⁹² In any event, the military exclusion is traditionally understood to cover compulsory military service (i.e., conscription), meaning that the right to be free from forced labor is unlikely to protect individuals who are part of the conscripted Russian armed forces, even if they were deceived, pressured, or misled into joining them.¹⁹³ By contrast, no such military exception applies to slavery, servitude or human trafficking.¹⁹⁴ Instead, the legal question is whether the recruitment and transfer of individuals through prohibited means were carried out for the purpose of exploitation. Bangladeshi men told Fortify Rights about how they were forcibly sent to participate in weapons training, ordered to the frontlines, exposed to lethal danger, and unable to leave—facts consistent with exploitation through forced services.

SERVITUDE AND PRACTICES SIMILAR TO SLAVERY

Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds also documented conditions that may, in some cases, reach the threshold of “servitude” or practices similar to slavery, including severe dependency, coercion, restrictions of movement, and deprivations of autonomy. International law defines slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.”¹⁹⁵ While such

¹⁹¹ Matthew Gillis, *Modern Slavery in Armed Conflict: Foreign ‘Forced Fighters’ in Ukraine*, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 2025, 74(3), pp. 707–721, p. 717.

¹⁹² Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (ILO No. 29), adopted June 28, 1930, I.L.O. Conf. Res. 29, U.N. Doc. Co29 (1930), Art. 2(2)(a), stipulating: “the term forced or compulsory labour shall not include (a) any work or service exacted in virtue of compulsory military service laws for work of a purely military character;” Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, adopted June 11, 2014, Registration No. I-612, Art. 1(3), stipulating: “The definition of forced or compulsory labour contained in the Convention is reaffirmed;” International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), U.N. Doc. A/6316, Art. 8(3)(c)(ii), specifying in the relevant part that “the term “forced or compulsory labour” shall not include: [...] Any service of a military character [...];” Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(a).

¹⁹³ Gillis, *Modern Slavery in Armed Conflict*, p. 714.

¹⁹⁴ ICCPR, Arts 8 (1) and 8 (2).

¹⁹⁵ Slavery Convention, adopted September 25, 1926, L.N. Res. Sept. 25, 1926, U.N. Doc. C.210.M.76.1926.VI (1926), Art. 1(1).

powers may take many forms, in most situations, the right of ownership includes use, enjoyment, and disposal of a person who is regarded as property, by placing him or her in a situation of dependence which entails his or her deprivation of any form of autonomy.¹⁹⁶ As for servitude, the term was to apply “to all conceivable forms of dominance and degradation of human beings by human beings.”¹⁹⁷

Several documented factors point to the potential that the recruitment of Bangladeshi men into the Russian Armed forces may amount to servitude. This includes deceptive and coercive recruitment practices that deprived the men of meaningful choices; the retention or confiscation of passports and other identity documents; restraints imposed on the men so they were unable to resign, leave, or safely return home; and the deployment into life-threatening conditions without genuine consent and under threat of punishment. These conditions warrant further investigation, particularly where victims are effectively trapped in military service.

APPLICATION OF LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO IDENTIFIED CASES OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY

The evidence documented by Truth Hounds, Fortify Rights, and others demonstrate that the recruitment and deployment of foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces follows varied patterns that require individualized legal assessment to properly identify cases of human trafficking. Even with an individualized analysis, the line between voluntary and deceptive recruitment is often difficult to discern. Under international humanitarian law, every combatant, including foreign fighters, integrated into the Russian Armed Forces are entitled to prisoner-of-war status upon capture. However, that classification does not determine whether their recruitment or deployment constitutes human trafficking under international human rights law, which requires a more in-depth analysis. However, a person’s status as a combatant or prisoner of war does not preclude recognition as a survivor of human trafficking if the elements of trafficking are satisfied.

For purposes of legal analysis, it is useful to distinguish between two groups of foreign fighters: (1) those who knowingly and voluntarily joined the Russian Armed Forces; and (2) those who were deceived or coerced into joining.¹⁹⁸ In many of the cases documented in this report, elements of initial consent coexisted with later coercion or deception, underscoring the importance of assessing the totality of circumstances.

¹⁹⁶ *Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga*, International Criminal Court (ICC), Case No. ICC-01/04-01/07, Judgment (Trial), March 7, 2014, https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/CR2015_04025.PDF, para. 975.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* William Schabas, *UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Nowak’s CCPR Commentary* (NP Engel 2019), 227, as cited in Gillis, 715.

¹⁹⁸ Gillis, *Modern Slavery in Armed Conflict*, pp. 707-721; pp. 708-709.

Fact-finding in these cases is constrained by limited access to official records and military documentation, particularly given the cross-border and conflict-related nature of the alleged recruitment. Survivor and family testimony therefore serves as primary evidence. Consistent patterns across multiple accounts strengthen the reliability of these findings, although the absence of access to official documentation limits the ability to provide a fully conclusive determination. The analysis below reflects a *prima facie* assessment for a better understanding of recruitment patterns based on the evidence currently available.

Foreign Fighters Who Voluntarily Joined Russian Armed Forces

It should be noted that in the cases discussed below, even where individuals initially signed contracts voluntarily and where there was no apparent evidence of deception at the point of recruitment, the possibility of human trafficking remains, and other human rights abuses may have occurred later. Elements of coercion or exploitation may appear after recruitment; for example, where individuals are prevented from resigning, subjected to beatings, denied payment, or have their documents confiscated. Trafficking may therefore occur not only at the point of recruitment but also during the period of service if coercive control is imposed.

One Nepali man initially sought civilian employment in Russia, but after speaking with other foreigners, he decided to sign a contract with the Russian Armed Forces.¹⁹⁹ There was no evidence of deception or coercion before or at the time of the contract signing. However, later he encountered serious mistreatment during his service, such as beatings and confiscation of personal belongings.²⁰⁰ While his initial recruitment may not meet the trafficking definition threshold, subsequent conduct raises concerns regarding coercive control and an inability to withdraw from military service.

Similarly, a Sri Lankan man also appeared to knowingly join the Russian army, having undergone a one-and-a-half-month-long training, received salary payments that he was able to send home, and explored the possibility of obtaining Russian citizenship.²⁰¹ He acknowledged hearing that others had been recruited through fraud or force, but stated that he was not aware of such practices in his unit.²⁰² Based on the available evidence, his initial recruitment does not appear to satisfy the “means” element of trafficking.

Another Sri Lankan man with more than two decades of military experience in Sri Lanka, also traveled to Russia with awareness of the ongoing war. He reported that he was promised he would not be sent to frontline combat roles but would instead perform support duties in the occupied territories. After signing a contract in Russian—accompanied by a leaflet in his native language outlining payment terms—he was deployed to an assault battalion and sent into combat, where he was wounded and captured. While his awareness of the conflict weighs against a finding of deception as to the existence of hostilities, any misrepresentation regarding his deployment to frontline roles may be legally relevant to the assessment of deception and exploitation.

¹⁹⁹ Truth Hounds interview with the prisoner of war from Nepal in the prisoner of war camp, Lviv Region, Ukraine, October, 3, 2025.

²⁰⁰ See above section of this report, “Recruitment and Suspected Trafficking of Foreign Fighters into the Russian Army from South Asia,” mentioning beatings and the confiscation of personal belongings.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Truth Hounds interview with a prisoner of war from Sri Lanka in the prisoner of war camp, Lviv Region, Ukraine, October 1, 2025.

Mohammed Masud, not his real name, similarly knew he was signing a contract with the Russian military and willingly contacted the broker who facilitated his enlistment. However, Mohammed Masud reported that he and his compatriots, communicated to the broker that they did not wish to join a combat battalion. After being assured that they would be assigned to electrical duties, they agreed to enlist. Once integrated into the army, Mohan reported that a Russian military commander mistreated him and demanded money.²⁰³

These cases illustrate the situation of individuals who voluntarily joined the Russian Armed Forces but did so with the expectation that they would serve in non-combat roles, such as electrician, cook, or clerk, rather than participate directly in hostilities. Such circumstances are legally relevant in assessing potential deception or subsequent coercion. Even where enlistment was voluntary, subsequent conduct—including reassignment contrary to explicit assurances, physical abuse, extortion by commanders, or restrictions preventing resignation—could satisfy the “means” and “purpose” elements of trafficking during the period of service.

Foreign Fighters Deceived or Coerced into Joining the Russian Armed Forces

A majority of Bangladeshi cases documented in this report contain strong indicators that recruitment into the Russian Armed Forces occurred through deception, fraud, and abuse of vulnerability, satisfying the elements of trafficking in persons under the Palermo Protocol. In these cases, the men were lured to Russia with the promises of civilian employment. The evidence indicates that the elements of trafficking in persons — act, means, and purpose—are satisfied.

Arman Mondol initially was promised employment in a European country. After learning that he would instead travel to Russia, he agreed to work as a cleaner. However, upon arriving to Russia, he was told to sign a document in Russian—a language he did not understand. This document proved to be a contract with the Russian army. He was subsequently taken for military training and deployed to the frontline in Ukraine.²⁰⁴

Maksudur Rahman was persuaded by a Bangladeshi broker to travel to Russia for a civilian cleaning job with a company-arranged business visa. Maksudur Rahman said he and others were taken through Dhaka and Moscow airports through irregular procedures, forced to pay additional money in the airport bathroom, and given a Russian-language document to sign that he believed was a civilian work contract. After arrival in Russia, brokers moved the group between locations before delivering them to a military compound, where a translator told them they had been “bought” to fight in the war. Maksudur Rahman said he was threatened, sent to the frontlines without proper training, witnessed other Bangladeshis being killed, received no salary, and endured harsh conditions. After being wounded and taken to a hospital, he escaped, hid for a period inside Russia, and eventually returned to Bangladesh with the help of the Bangladesh Embassy.²⁰⁵

Imran Ali, not his real name, knew he was traveling to Russia but intended to secure

²⁰³Fortify Rights interview with Z.E., Bangladesh, August 13, and October 10, 2025.

²⁰⁴Anjuman, “Bangladeshi Men Tricked into Fighting Russia’s War,” *Deutsche Welle*. See also, Fortify Rights interview with Z.B., Bangladesh, August 1, 2025.

²⁰⁵Fortify Rights interview with Maksudur Rahman, Bangladesh, February 1, 2026.

civilian employment. The brokers reportedly asked him to sign a document in Russian language, claiming it was a company document for civilian work. Rahamt Ali did not understand Russian. Only during the military training did he realize that the document he had signed was a military contract. He was later killed on the frontline.²⁰⁶

Habibullah sought employment in Italy. A broker told him he would first need to travel to Russia and work in a Russian chocolate factory for at least 15 days or one month before proceeding to Italy. He never reached Italy. Instead, he was coerced into signing a Russian-language contract with the Russian army that he did not understand.²⁰⁷ According to his brother, Habibullah later stated that he had been “sold” into the Russian army and that his passport was confiscated. He reportedly feared being killed if he attempted to escape and ultimately died while serving with the Russian Armed Forces.²⁰⁸

Ahmed, not his real name, who later died on the frontline, hired a broker who sent him to Russia with the understanding that he would perform welding work for a civilian company.²⁰⁹ There, he was deceived into signing a Russian-language contract to fight in and against Ukraine and taken to the frontlines. The cases described in this section most likely meet the criteria for human trafficking, namely the act, means, and purpose. However, their legal status under international humanitarian law complicates repatriation and protection. Under international humanitarian law, a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict is considered a combatant and, if captured, acquires prisoner-of-war status, regardless of whether they were recruited through deception or coercion. Prisoner-of-war status implicitly provides for repatriation to the state on which they depend—in this context, the Russian Federation. For individuals trafficked into the Russian Armed Forces, which in the case of victims of human trafficking may subject them to further military deployment by Russia and further human rights violations. However, Russia does not seek to include third-country nationals in prisoner of war exchanges with Ukraine, thus effectively trapping them in prisoner of war custody of the Ukrainian state. Therefore, the countries from which the presumed trafficking victims are nationals should engage with the Ukrainian authorities through diplomatic cooperation to establish the circumstances of such persons’ involvement in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and take measures in the best interests of the victims, including repatriation to their home countries where appropriate.

²⁰⁶Fortify Rights interview with Z.F., Bangladesh, September 27, 2025.

²⁰⁷Fortify Rights interview with Z.A., Bangladesh, May 31, 2025.

²⁰⁸*Ibid.*

²⁰⁹Fortify Rights interview with Z.D., Bangladesh, August 2, 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

- **ENSURE** the voluntary, safe, and immediate repatriation of all foreign fighters whose contracts have expired or who wish to leave military service.
- **INVESTIGATE** and prosecute all individuals and networks—including state and private intermediaries implicated in human trafficking, coercion, or deceptive recruitment of foreign nationals for military service.
- **ESTABLISH** and publicly communicate clear procedures allowing foreign nationals to withdraw from military service without retaliation.
- **PROVIDE** transparent data on the number, nationality, and status of all foreign nationals serving in the Russian Armed Forces and those captured as prisoners of war.
- **GUARANTEE** access to international monitoring bodies, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, to inspect detention facilities and camps where foreign nationals involved in the conflict are held.
- **END** hostilities and the full-scale illegal military aggression against Ukraine, and end the occupation of all Ukrainian sovereign territory.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH

- **STRENGTHEN** diplomatic efforts to secure the safe return of any Bangladeshi human trafficking survivors in Russia or Ukraine.
- **ENHANCE** monitoring of migration pathways through third countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and establish information-sharing agreements to detect trafficking indicators linked to Russia-bound travel.
- **WORK** with the Russian and Ukrainian authorities to secure the return of bodies of deceased nationals and provide transparent updates to families.
- **ENHANCE** consular protection and monitoring for nationals traveling to or residing in Russia, including by establishing emergency hotlines, proactive outreach mechanisms, and dedicated assistance services for survivors of human trafficking.

- **INVESTIGATE** and prosecute recruitment brokers and travel agencies involved in deceptive recruitment practices and in trafficking individuals into foreign military service, including those using third-country transit routes, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
- **DEVELOP** and implement national awareness campaigns to inform citizens—particularly unemployed or vulnerable populations—about the risks of fraudulent overseas employment schemes and deceptive military recruitment.
- **PROVIDE** comprehensive reintegration assistance for returning survivors, including access to psychosocial support, employment and livelihood services, legal aid, and debt-relief mechanisms.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UKRAINE

- **COOPERATE** with international anti-trafficking organizations, including the International Organization for Migration, and service providers to identify and screen potential survivors of human trafficking and other human rights violations among captured foreign fighters held as prisoners of war.
- **TAKE** into consideration obligations under international humanitarian law when deciding on the return of foreign prisoners of war to the Russian Federation.
- **CONSULT** with the International Organization for Migration and International Committee of the Red Cross to develop coordinated procedures addressing the rights and protections of individuals recruited through fraud, coercion, or deception with the proper rights and obligations, recognizing their dual status as prisoner of war under international humanitarian law and as potential survivors of human trafficking under international human rights law.
- **CONTINUE** to facilitate transparent and timely information-sharing regarding the identification, status, and conditions of captured or deceased foreign fighters.
- **COLLABORATE** with relevant governments to develop bilateral frameworks aimed at preventing human trafficking, including the deceptive or coerced recruitment of their nationals into foreign armed forces, drawing on existing diplomatic efforts and lessons learned from prior international cooperation efforts.

TO U.N. AGENCIES AND ANTI-TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

- **INITIATE** systematic screenings, in collaboration with Ukrainian authorities, of potential victims of human trafficking, including among prisoners of war held in Ukraine's prisoner of war camps.
- **SUPPORT** Ukrainian authorities as well as governments of the countries of origin of prisoners of war in providing specialized protection and assistance to identified survivors of human trafficking, including access to medical care, psychosocial services, legal assistance, and other protective measures upon their return.

- **CONDUCT** systematic research and documentation on recruitment methods, intermediary networks, and contractual practices used to recruit foreign nationals into the Russian Armed Forces and advocate for accountability measures at national and international levels based on these findings.
- **WORK** with relevant governments to prevent prolonged or indefinite detention of foreign prisoners of war and to facilitate durable solutions consistent with international humanitarian and human rights law.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The lead researchers and authors of this report are Fortify Rights Director John Quinley, Fortify Rights consultants Tanbirul Miraj Ripon and Masum Billah, Truth Hounds Senior Legal Counsel Volodymyr Hryshko and Lawyer Andrii Latsyba, Truth Hounds Researcher Denys Sultanhaliiev, and Truth Hounds Engaged Researcher Maria Tomak.

The writing, research, and editing team at Fortify Rights included Executive Director Amy Smith; Senior Director Peter Bouckaert; Chit Seng, Senior Human Rights Specialist; and Matthew Smith Chief Executive Officer at Fortify Rights. The editing team from Truth Hounds, included Head of Research Roman Koval and Co-Executive Director Dmytro Koval.

Fortify Rights Senior Visual Design Specialist Iuri Kato created the layout and design of the report. Photographs were taken by Tanbirul Miraj Ripon for Fortify Rights.

Special thanks also to the generous supporters of Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds who make our work possible.

"I WAS TRICKED into the WAR:"

The Risk of Human Trafficking and Coerced Recruitment of Bangladeshi Men into Russia's War in Ukraine



Photograph of Habibullah, a Bangladeshi man who died on the frontlines after relatives told Fortify Rights he had been trafficked to Russia.

Habibullah's brother told Fortify Rights that May 1, 2025, was the last time he spoke with him by phone. During that call, Habibullah pleaded: "Please save me if you can. I haven't eaten for three to four days." ©Private, 2024

This joint report by Fortify Rights and Truth Hounds reveals how Bangladeshi men were recruited through coercion and deception into the Russian Armed Forces. Through fraudulent job offers, misinformation, and scams, brokers target men from low-income countries with limited migration pathways into joining the Russian army. Many were routed through third countries, given Russian-language contracts they could not read, and transferred into military training facilities shortly after arrival in Russia. These men were then forced to provide the manpower needed to sustain Russia's advances into Ukrainian territory.