

Hundreds of desperate Sri Lankans hired as mercenaries in Ukraine war

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Worsening poverty and unemployment, the result of Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic crisis, has seen thousands of workers and youth migrate to foreign countries to find work. Recent media reports reveal that many have become victims of racketeers, with disastrous consequences.

Al-Jazeera recently reported that hundreds of Sri Lankans are now serving as mercenaries with the Russian military in Ukraine. Most of them, the news outlet states, were "lured into combat by Russia's offer of salaries up to \$US3,000 (more than 900,000 Sri Lankan rupees) a month and the prospect of Russian citizenship."

The Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported on March 31 that about 100 former Sri Lankan military servicemen have joined the Ukraine foreign legion while confirming that hundreds of others are in the Russian military. Sri Lankan civilians are also serving on both sides of the bloody US-NATO war against Russia.

The mercenaries are recruited illegally by unregistered job agencies in Sri Lanka and enter via Poland and Georgia on tourist visas. The job agencies inform the former Sri Lankan military personnel that they have to serve on the battlefield. The civilians are falsely told, however, they are being hired for civilian jobs in Poland, Georgia and Ukraine but on arrival in Ukraine are sent to the frontline.

Sri Lankan police spokesman Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Nihal Thalduwa told the *Daily Mirror* on March 26 that two individuals had been arrested that month for "operating a foreign employment agency in Kadawatha." They were accused, he said of "trafficking a group of 55 Sri Lankans to conflict zones in Ukraine."

Thalduwa said two of those trafficked to Ukraine had

been killed, five escaped to neighbouring countries and 17 had returned to Sri Lanka. "Each person had been charged between Rs. 250,000 and 500,000 by the fraudulent foreign employment agency," he added.

According to *Al-Jazeera*, at least five Sri Lankans have been killed in the Ukraine war in the past few months. Three, including Andrew Raneesh Hewage, who left the Sri Lankan army in 2012, were killed in Bakhmut, in a Russian attack during a rescue operation. The names of the other two have not been released. Last week, 27-year-old Nipuna Silva died in a drone attack by Ukrainian forces and Senaka Bandara, another Sri Lankan, was injured as he was attempting to move the injured Silva to safety.

Those killed or injured are not insured and do not receive any compensation. The Sri Lankan government and its Foreign Employment Bureau washes their hands of any responsibility for them or the plight of their families, declaring that their actions are illegal.

While unemployment and desperate poverty compelled these ex-soldiers and civilians to risk their lives in war zones in Ukraine, the same social processes drove tens of thousands of rural youth to join the military during successive Sri Lankan governments' war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Contrary to Colombo's claims that these youth were "heroes" who joined to "save the motherland," most were economic conscripts. They signed up to help their poverty-stricken families and believed that they would be financially compensated if killed or wounded. Thousands died or were maimed in the brutal three-decade communal war against the LTTE. Over 30,000 deserted during the conflict, some of whom joined the criminal underworld or became hired killers for money.

Ukraine war mercenaries are also being recruited

from other countries in Asia and Africa. Two weeks ago, *News24* reported that the Russian military claimed to have killed 103 mercenaries, from Nigeria, Algeria and South Africa, involved in combat operations in Ukraine.

Early last month, the international media reported that Indian and Nepali nationals had been trafficked by illegal gangs to the Russian army. New Delhi has called on the Putin Government to discharge Indian nationals that had been drafted into the Russian army.

More broadly, the situation facing hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan workers without work visas who have been trafficked into the Middle East by illegal job agencies is also disastrous.

Last month's *Sunday Times* revealed that there are 20,000 Sri Lankans currently working in Kuwait without visas and thousands more are stranded in Dubai after arriving on tourist visas. Many Sri Lankan workers cannot afford the substantial amounts of money required to get a work visa and attempt to migrate using tourist visas.

Late last year, several hundred Sri Lankan workers in Oman were arrested and incarcerated in detention camps after the government stopped the conversion of all types of tourist visas. Hundreds of other poverty-stricken Sri Lankan migrant workers are now living on the streets in Oman.

While the Sri Lankan government has completely abandoned these stranded workers, it continues to urge Sri Lankan workers to seek overseas employment because their remittances provide desperately needed foreign currency. As the Central Bank of Sri Lanka noted last year, “[B]eing a major source of foreign exchange earnings, workers’ remittances have covered around 80 percent of the annual trade deficit, on average, over the past two decades.”

According to an International Labour Organization report issued last December, over 535,000 Sri Lankan workers had secured overseas jobs between January 2022 and September 2023.

University of Colombo Sociology Professor Subhangi Herath told the *Daily Mirror* that Sri Lankans are migrating in “the hope of a better future and failure to see a political future in this country.”

People study and work hard, she continued,

“expecting some sort of dignified job in the country. But when they see unemployment levels rising, and feel they won’t be able to get absorbed into any well-paid and acceptable job, they think that they have to go somewhere and work for even a meagre salary, which will be high when you convert it to Sri Lankan rupees.”

While tens of thousands leave in the expectation of a better future, last month's *Sunday Times* revealed that at least one Sri Lankan migrant worker died each day in 2022. The newspaper said: “There were 389 natural deaths, 30 deaths by suicide, three murders, 36 deaths in road traffic accidents, 29 other accidents, and 20 attributed to the coronavirus disease.”

This data, the *Sunday Times* admitted, “does not in any way reflect the actual tragedies that Sri Lankan migrant workers face. Many deaths go unreported. Some who have died are undocumented workers, and their last rites are often done by close friends who raise funds or by migrant worker groups. If not, the remains are handled by host governments.”

Like its counterparts across South Asia, Africa and other underdeveloped regions, the Wickremesinghe government and all its predecessors are only interested in the foreign currency remittances of their migrant citizens, and are totally indifferent to their plight and the life and death problems these workers confront.



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