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Russia Scrambles for Soldiers Amid Ukraine War Manpower Shortage

By James Beardsworth

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A Russian serviceman in the occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol. **Vladimir Gerdo / TASS**

Several mobile military enlistment offices could be seen Saturday on the sidelines of an annual half-marathon race in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

"Mobile selection point for contract service," read the blue lettering on the side of one of the large trucks, which was suspended over an image of an aircraft carrier and a fighter jet. Another photograph from the event showed recruitment officers mingling with runners.

Such recruitment points appear to be an increasingly common sight in Russian cities as the Kremlin struggles to redress the army's manpower shortage in Ukraine without formally declaring war and announcing a full, or partial, mobilization.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has been fought on multiple fronts in the face of a spirited Ukrainian defense, has severely depleted Moscow's infantry reserves, analysts say, and

military officials are rushing to plug the hole.

Since the beginning of the war, mobile enlistment offices have been spotted in the northern city of Arkhangelsk, in towns in the neighboring Murmansk region and at a pro-war concert in the city of Severomorsk. A delivery of mobile enlistment offices was reported to Russia's Far East Military District in March, with men to be recruited across eastern and southern Siberia.

Russians who have completed their military service are also being offered large amounts to sign on for short-term military contracts, according to media reports.

Those who opt for three-month contracts could earn over 170,000 rubles ($2,900) a month — about four times the average local salary — according to an advertisement published last week in Tula, a city 200 kilometers south of Moscow. A military recruiter in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya last month offered a reporter posing as someone interested in joining up a first-month salary of 300,000 rubles ($5,200) after enlistment.

"At this stage, the Russian military is fighting this with a cobbled together force of unit fragments that they pieced together," military analyst Michael Kofman said last week on the War on the Rocks podcast. "The big challenge they have is they can't replace losses effectively and they have no units to rotate."

Of the approximately 150,000 Russian troops used to attack Ukraine in late February, an estimated one-third have been killed or injured, according to British officials.

And as the Russian army pushes forward with its offensive in eastern Ukraine, it falls far short of the 3:1 ratio of attackers to defenders that experts say an attacking force needs to be successful.

"Given the model of the Russian Armed Forces, once you factor in the losses, they are operating at roundabout their limit," said Nick Reynolds, an expert in land warfare at the London-based Royal United Services Institute.

In other attempts to bolster troop numbers, the Kremlin has apparently been reducing its military presence in other foreign countries and relocating troops to Ukraine.

Russia has reportedly redeployed soldiers stationed in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as withdrawn soldiers from Syria and moved Russian mercenary units fighting in African countries to Ukraine.

Authorities are also pushing through legislation to increase the upper age limit for those able to sign up for contract service.

A legislative proposal put before parliament last week by two deputies from the ruling United Russia party – including one former deputy defense minister – will allow Russian men over age 40, and foreigners over the age of 30, to sign a military contract.

As well as offering new recruits large sums of money, Russia is reportedly pressuring men who have recently completed their military service to sign new contracts.

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A more radical solution to the shortages of soldiers available to fight in eastern Ukraine is for Russia to use conscripts more widely, according to analysts.

Although Putin has pledged that conscripts will not be used in Ukraine, Russian military officials have admitted some were deployed in the first days of combat and many Russians remain fearful that loved ones on military service could be sent to the front.

“People are worried their kids might be sent to Ukraine. Basically that is the only concern for most people right now,” said Denis Koksharov, the chairman of Prizyvnik, a legal organization that protects the rights of Russian conscripts.

Twice a year, Russia’s military draft raises about 130,000 men, who after four months of military training can legally be sent to fight abroad. But even if conscripts were deployed, analysts said their presence would do little to bolster Russia’s combat power.

“Conscripts will be equipped with the bare minimum level of training... and as we’ve seen so far in the war, that bare minimum is basically inadequate,” analyst Reynolds said.

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