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Zambian Student Killed in Ukraine Was Wagner Recruit, Prigozhin Says

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Russian Defense Ministry

The head of the Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group confirmed Tuesday that a Zambian student killed while fighting for the Russian military in Ukraine had been recruited from prison by Wagner.

Nathan Lemekhandi Nyirenda, 23, had been studying nuclear engineering at the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute before he was convicted on drug possession charges in 2020.

He was killed on the frontlines of Ukraine on Sept. 22, the same month that videos emerged of Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin personally recruiting Russian prisoners, promising them their freedom in exchange for serving six months in Ukraine.

In a statement published by his Concord company, Prigozhin claimed that Nyirenda, who was serving a nine-and-a-half-year prison sentence, agreed to become a mercenary as an act of gratitude for "Russia helping Africans to gain independence."

Related article: Video Shows Prigozhin Recruiting Russian Prisoners for Ukraine Fight

“PMC Wagner saves thousands of Africans, and if I go to war with you, this is probably the least I can pay for our debt. And if I stay alive, I will learn how to fight for my country,” Prigozhin quoted Nyirenda as telling him.

Zambian authorities said Russia did not inform them of Nyirenda’s death until mid-November.

The Zambian foreign ministry and Nyirenda’s relatives demanded that Russia “urgently provide information on the circumstances” surrounding his death and why he had been sent to the frontlines in Ukraine.

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