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# Sri Lanka Says 16 Citizens Killed Fighting in Ukraine

By AFP

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**General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine**

At least 16 citizens of Sri Lanka fighting as mercenaries have been killed in Russia's war against Ukraine, the island nation's deputy defense minister said Wednesday.

Sri Lankan authorities opened an inquiry last week into the recruitment of its citizens in the war and have since identified 288 retired soldiers who participated in the conflict, Deputy Defense Minister Pramitha Tennakoon said.

"We have confirmed information about 16 who have been killed," he told reporters in Colombo without saying whether those killed had been fighting on the side of Moscow or Kyiv.

But ruling party lawmaker Gamini Waleboda told parliament on Monday that most had been recruited to fight alongside the Russian army.

According to Waleboda, those who joined had been duped with promises of high salaries and falsely told they would be given non-combat roles, echoing similar claims made by authorities in nearby India and Nepal after a number of their citizens were killed in the conflict.

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Tennakoon said the recruitment of Sri Lankans was being treated as a human trafficking enterprise and urged military officers not to fall prey to the recruitment drive.

The Sri Lankan government was also in talks with the Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministries to track down Sri Lankans in the two countries and bring them back safely.

"This is a delicate issue," Tennakoon said. "We are friends with Russia, we are friends with Ukraine. Both are important for us so we are talking to the foreign ministries to get our people back safely."

## Police arrests

Complaints began pouring in from relatives after the Sri Lankan Defense Ministry opened its probe last week to collect information on those who had traveled to both countries to join the war effort.

Sri Lanka has repeatedly warned its citizens against traveling to Russia or Ukraine to join the fighting.

But there are no restrictions on Sri Lankans traveling abroad and large numbers of citizens have left in the wake of an unprecedented economic crisis in mid-2022.

Police arrested two retired army officers, including a major general, last week for illegally acting as recruiting agents for Russian mercenary companies.

India and Nepal have also confirmed that numerous citizens of those countries had been recruited to fight alongside the Russian army over the past year.

At least 19 Nepalis had been killed in combat, according to figures from the Himalayan republic released in March.

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