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Sri Lanka Seeks Release of Ex-Soldiers in Russia and Ukraine

By AFP

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Alexei Konovalov / TASS

Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry said Thursday it is seeking the release of hundreds of its ex-soldiers fighting for Russia, as well as around a dozen prisoners of war in Ukraine.

The Sri Lankan government opened an investigation earlier this month into the illegal recruitment of its citizens for the war, identifying 455 former soldiers who had gone to fight on the side of Russia.

Colombo will send a delegation to Russia in June to negotiate the release of the men, including 37 wounded Sri Lankans, Foreign Minister Tharaka Balasuriya told reporters.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is also due to speak with his Ukrainian counterpart about the release of "10 to 12" Sri Lankan prisoners of war, Balasuriya added.

Related article: Sri Lanka Says 16 Citizens Killed Fighting in Ukraine

At least 16 citizens of Sri Lanka fighting as mercenaries have been killed in Russia's war against Ukraine, authorities in the island nation said earlier this month.

"We want to stop Sri Lankans going to Russia and Ukraine," Balasuriya said Thursday alongside the Russian ambassador to Colombo. The foreign minister added that many had been duped into believing they would receive high salaries, land and the right to settle in Russia.

Sri Lankan police have arrested two retired generals for illegally acting as recruiting agents for Russian mercenary firms.

Russian ambassador Levan Dzhagaryan, speaking alongside Balasuriya, said Moscow was investigating the issue but declined to give details.

"Why you are talking only about Russia?" he asked reporters. "Why don't you talk about Ukraine?"

Asked how many visas had been granted to Sri Lankans in recent months, Dzhagaryan said it "was a lot."

India and Nepal have also said that a number of their citizens were recruited over the past year to fight alongside the Russian army, with multiple confirmed deaths.

"If Sri Lankans are under threat and are in a dangerous situation, the duty of the government... is to ensure that they are safely returned back," Balasuriya said.

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