The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

AP Investigates Russia's Recruitment of African Women to Make Drones: What We Learned

October 10, 2024



A Russian-made drone. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

A new investigation by the Associated Press details how Russia has lured dozens of young African women to produce drones for its invasion of Ukraine.

Drawn to Russia by promises of plane tickets, education, higher salaries and a "European" adventure, the young women instead end up at a drone plant in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Russia's republic of Tatarstan, where they work alongside students as young as 16.

The AP says that Russia has been targeting women aged 18-22, especially, from countries like Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, in addition to places like Sri Lanka and Latin America, as it grapples with a domestic labor shortage fueled by wartime casualties and mass emigration.

Here's what we learned from the AP investigation:

Slick, shady recruiting

The recruitment program, called "Alabuga Start," is backed by a dynamic, modern social media campaign. The videos show African women directing cranes, wearing hard hats, applying paint or chemicals in protective gear, sightseeing in Tatarstan and playing sports.

The ads promised a free plane ticket to "Europe" in exchange for completing a computer game and a 100-word Russian vocabulary test. In the first half of this year, 182 women were recruited, according to a Facebook page that promotes the program.

The campaign does not say why it targets such young women, but some analysts said it may be because officials believe they will be easier to control.

In Uganda and Ethiopia, the program was even promoted by the countries' education ministries as a way to make money and learn new skills. But when Sierra Leone's ambassador to Russia met five program participants in May, he appeared to believe it was a study program.

The program has also enlisted the help of influencers. South African Bassie, who has almost 800,000 Instagram and TikTok followers, said the program was an easy way to make money and encouraged her followers to share the post with their job-seeking friends.

Officials even held recruiting events in Uganda and tried to recruit from orphanages there, according to messages on Alabuga's Telegram channel.

However, Alabuga Start has become more direct in recent months about what it really offers, stating that it "is NOT an educational program."

Caustic chemicals, constant surveillance

Many of the women only learn what their actual jobs will be once they arrive. One woman said she realized it was a "trap" soon after she arrived.

"I regret and I curse the day I started making all those things," she added.

The workers travel between the factory and their living quarters by bus, passing through multiple security checks. They share dormitories that are "guarded around the clock" and surveilled at all times. Pets, alcohol and drugs are strictly forbidden.

While they are provided with local SIM cards, they are not allowed to take their phones into the factory, which is a "sensitive military site."

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At the factory, many women have to work with caustic chemicals with no protective gear. One woman said the chemicals made her face feel like it was "being pricked with tiny needles" and that "small holes" that itched "severely" appeared on her cheeks.

“A lot of girls are suffering,” she added. AP claims that it was sent a video showing another woman wearing an Alabuga uniform with her face similarly affected.

Poor treatment and pay disputes

Most of the women interviewed by AP said that life at Alabuga did not meet their expectations. Four of the women interviewed said they had to work shifts of up to 12 hours and that they had inconsistent days off.

One said that the cost of their accommodation, airfare, medical care and Russian classes were deducted from their salary, leaving them with little money. She said that the African women there were “maltreated like donkeys, being slaved.”

Russia’s actions “could potentially fulfill the criteria of trafficking if the recruitment is fraudulent and the purpose is exploitation,” a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights told AP.

Uganda’s gender, labor and social development minister told AP that her ministry raised concerns with its embassy in Moscow about the Alabuga recruiting effort, particularly over the age of the women, because “female migrant workers are the most vulnerable category.”

Increased production

Russia and Iran signed a $17-billion deal in 2022 for Russia to begin using Iranian drones. Initially, the Shahed-136 drones were shipped disassembled to Russia, but production has shifted to Alabuga and possibly another factory. Both countries have denied that Iran supplied Russia with weapons.

Alabuga, Russia’s main plant for these drones, plans to produce 6,000 a year by 2025, according to the leaked documents and the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security.

David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector who works at the institute, said that the target was ahead of schedule, with Alabuga currently producing 4,500.

Decreased accuracy?

Nearly 4,000 drones were launched at Ukraine between the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022 and December 2023, according to Albright’s organization. In the first seven months of 2024, Russia launched nearly twice that.

However, an AP analysis of about 2,000 Shahed attacks documented by Ukraine’s military since July 29 shows that about 95% of the drones hit no discernible target.

According to Albright’s team, about 14% of Shaheds hit their targets in Ukraine before July.

The large failure rate could be due to Ukraine’s improved air defenses, although Albright said it also could be because of the low-skilled workforce.

Another explanation could be that Russia is using so-called “dummy drones” that do not

carry a payload to overwhelm Ukraine’s air defenses and force them to waste ammunition.

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