

A group of dozen of Rwandan women are among people who have been recruited more recently to fill urgent labour shortage in wartime between Russia and Ukraine, an authoritative source has confirmed.

According to the US-based Institute for Science and International Security, the Alabuga Start program primarily targets African women, using the promise of a high monthly salary (double what can be earned on average in their native country; and more than such a position would normally earn in Russia), work training, long-term accommodations and integration into Russian society.

The social media ads promised the young African women a free plane ticket, money and a faraway adventure in Europe. Just complete a computer game and a 100-word Russian vocabulary test.

But instead of a work-study programme in fields like hospitality and catering, some of them learned only after arriving on the steppes of Russia's Tatarstan region that they would be toiling in a factory to make weapons of war, assembling thousands of Iranian-designed attack drones to be launched into Ukraine.

The group of young Rwandan ladies joined other young women aged between 18-22 from places like Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Latin America, according to the online campaign dubbed "Alabuga Start" dedicated to recruit young foreign women to join drone manufacturing in Russia.

The recruitment program 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.

Initially advertised as a work-study program, Alabuga Start in recent months is more direct about what it offers foreigners, insisting on newer posts that "is NOT an educational programme" although one of them still shows young women in plaid school uniforms.

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them learned only after arriving on the steppes of Russia's Tatarstan region that they would be toiling in a factory to make weapons of war — assembling thousands of Iranian-designed attack drones to be launched into Ukraine.

To fill an urgent labour shortage in wartime Russia, Russia has been recruiting women aged 18-22 from places like Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, as well as the South Asian country of Sri Lanka.

Moscow began using Iranian imports of the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in battle later that year.

The Alabuga Special Economic Zone was set up in 2006 to attract businesses and investment to Tatarstan. The recruiting drive relies on a robust social media campaign of slickly edited videos with upbeat music that show African women visiting Tatarstan's cultural sites or playing sports, it said.

It expanded rapidly after the invasion and parts switched to military production, adding or renovating new buildings, according to satellite images. The videos on Alabuga's social media pages don't mention the plant's role at the heart of Russian drone production, but the Special Economic Zone is more open with Russian media.

Although some private companies still operate there, the plant is referred to as "Alabuga" in leaked documents that detail contracts between Russia and Iran.

### ***Promises of a better job***

Alabuga now has plans to produce 6,000 of them a year by 2025, according to the leaked documents and the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security.

Potential recruits are not told that they could be involved in producing Shahed 136 drones. Instead, when drone production work is mentioned, the recruitment process emphasizes the making of M5 drones, built in the same building as the Shahed 136 drones, but by a different company, Albatross LLC, and on a much smaller scale, and advertised for civilian use (but leaked documents and media reporting state that some fraction of the M5 drones have been used in Russian combat operations).

In the first half of 2023, estimates show that about 100 Alabuga Polytechnic students received training in Tehran, Iran, from Iranian experts on making the Shahed 136 airframe.

To help meet its ambitious Shahed 136 drone production targets and to develop a long-term workforce, JSC Alabuga and its respective organizations moved to recruit young men and women, aged 16-22, from within Russia, the CIS countries, and countries in Africa including Rwanda.

Dr Thierry Murangira, the spokesperson of Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) told reporters recently that promises of a better job, and internship, among others are the major factors leading to human trafficking targeting especially young women from Rwanda.

Latest estimates by Rwanda Investigation Bureau (RIB) show that total of 150 people were trafficked between 202 2022 including 68 individuals who were under the age of 18, while another group 68 people were aged between 18 to 30, and 14 were aged above 30.