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**Independent International Commission of Inquiry on
Ukraine**

Note by the Secretary-General*

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, submitted in accordance with paragraph 30 of Human Rights Council resolution 61/29, on the situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression.

* The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline so as to include the most recent information.

Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine

Summary

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine submits the present report to the General Assembly at its eighty-first session.

The Commission has continued to investigate the impact on civilians of the large-scale attacks by Russian armed forces on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, in particular during the 2025-2026 cold season, as well as the cumulative effect of these attacks since the outset. Over four years of systematic waves of attacks have caused intolerable living conditions for the civilian population. Repeated strikes with hundreds of drones and missiles at a time have inflicted significant damage to Ukraine's energy sector. Consequent outages have affected millions.

The scale of civilian suffering has been incremental over the years, due to the augmenting intensity of the attacks during the cold season, their widening geographic scope, and their repeated character. According to multiple interviews, persons living in the affected areas have developed various physical and mental health conditions as a consequence of prolonged exposure to cold in their homes. Describing how her family coped with extensive outages during the winter, a woman from Dnipro city stated, *"Cold—it paralyzes you; there's simply no way to get warm, and terrifying thoughts come into your mind"*. As a new cold season sets in, the attacks have again intensified and there is serious concern for the life and health of civilians.

The Commission assesses that the Russian commanders ordering the attacks had the knowledge that the heating facilities they targeted in large civilian agglomerations were indispensable to the civilian population, in particular during the winter. Russian authorities have made official declarations concerning further attacks and referred to a plan for their commission. The evidence collected demonstrates that the waves of attacks by Russian authorities against Ukraine's energy infrastructure were carried out with intent and pursuant to a state policy to deprive the civilian population from essential energy supplies and cause suffering.

The Commission has concluded that the Russian authorities have committed war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects and the crimes against humanity of other inhumane acts.

Another issue investigated concerns the recruitment of foreign nationals to serve in the Russian armed forces. The Commission found compelling evidence that Russian authorities, in nexus with agents or agencies operating in different countries or geographic regions, have trafficked persons from 29 countries, using deception or coercion, to recruit them in the Russian armed forces. The men recruited responded to offers of civilian employment in the Russian Federation that appeared lucrative, genuine and credible. Recruiting agents arranged the transnational transfer of groups of recruits to the Russian Federation. Soon after arrival, however, the men were forced to sign contracts in Russian with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Phones and passports were often confiscated.

The recruits were shocked to discover that they would be serving for the Russian armed forces. The wife of a man who was recruited said, *"They took his passport and just told him to sign here, here and here on the contract. It was only in Russian. He was totally pressured and had no choice"*. The men have been deployed on frontlines in Ukraine and assigned dangerous tasks. Many have been killed or have gone missing. The departure, disappearance, injury, death, or capture of the victims has a long-lasting psychological impact on their families, who have carried out intense search efforts to find their loved ones.

The agents or agencies who approached the recruits in different countries presented themselves as legitimate or Government-endorsed businesses. They processed visas and travel documents for groups of recruits and in some cases travelled with them. The

Commission noted a high degree of coordination between agents operating around the world and the Russian authorities.

Government authorities of several countries have acknowledged that their citizens have been recruited in the Russian armed forces and have opened investigations concerning recruitment networks. On several occasions, Russian officials have publicly denied illegal recruitment.

Based on the collected evidence, the Commission has concluded that the Russian authorities have committed trafficking in persons, and other human rights violations.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 49/1, adopted on 4 March 2022, the Human Rights Council decided to urgently establish an Independent International Commission of Inquiry to investigate alleged violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, and related crimes in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. The Commission's mandate was last extended on 31 March 2026. It is composed of Erik Møse (Chair), Pablo de Greiff, and Vrinda Grover.
2. The Commission's work is guided by the principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, and integrity. It adopts a victim-centred approach and a strict respect of the "do no harm" principle.
3. Since its establishment, the Commission has interviewed 3079 persons (women, men and children) and collected thousands of documents and open-source material. It has travelled to Ukraine 28 times. The liquidity crisis and budget reductions at the United Nations have continued to severely affect the work of the Commission.
4. The Commission extends its deep gratitude to victims and witnesses for sharing experiences and to organizations for the information provided.
5. It appreciates the cooperation of the Government of Ukraine. The Russian Federation continued not to recognize the Commission, and 41 written requests for access, information and meetings remained unanswered

II. Attacks on energy infrastructure

A. Attacks by Russian armed forces on Ukraine's energy infrastructure

6. The Commission has continued to investigate the impact on civilians of large-scale attacks by the Russian Federation targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure since 10 October 2022. For more than four years now, strikes using hundreds of drones and missiles at a time have inflicted significant damage to the country's energy sector. Heat supply facilities, thermal power plants, power generation facilities, electricity distribution facilities, substations, transmission lines, and gas infrastructure facilities across Ukraine have been hit repeatedly and were damaged or destroyed by the attacks. Prolonged disruptions and outages of electricity, heat, water, and gas have caused intolerable living conditions for the civilian population during extremely cold periods.
7. As the 2026 cold season sets in, there is serious concern for the life and health of civilians during the coming winter. On 1 September 2026, Mr. Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation declared, "*The Russian Armed Forces have been given instructions to prepare and carry out massive strikes on Ukraine's energy. They are striking us — they will get a response*".¹ On 14 August 2026, the telegram channel of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation forwarded its military update on attacks against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, with the message "*In winter you will freeze*".² At the time of writing the present report such attacks were continuing.
8. In its previous reports, the Commission had established that the large-scale attacks by the Russian armed forces targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure were widespread and systematic, disproportionate, and amounted to the war crime of excessive incidental death,

¹ Official website of the President of the Russian Federation, "Answers to media questions", 1 September 2026.

² Post on Telegram channel, 14 August 2026.

injury, or damage. It also found that the objective of such attacks was to disrupt the energy system of Ukraine, with the predictable effects on the heating system.³

9. The present report focuses on the impact on civilians of continued strikes on energy infrastructure through the winter of 2025-2026, and on their accumulated impact on the civilian population after four years of attacks. The Commission has relied on the accounts of 255 persons who endured winter under these conditions in Dnipro, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Poltava, Zaporizhzhia, Zhitomir Oblasts, as well as Ukrainian authorities, medical doctors, and non-governmental organisations. Other oblasts of Ukraine were also gravely affected.

10. During the last cold season, the Russian armed forces intensified the attacks against Ukraine's critical infrastructure, using long-range drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles throughout the winter, as temperatures plunged to minus 21°C and heating was indispensable for the civilian population. The frequency of air raids, repeated strikes on the same facilities, and cold temperatures have placed a heavy strain on repair capabilities. According to Ukrainian authorities, the attacks reduced thermal power generation capacities by 70 per cent in the most affected areas and millions of civilians were left without electricity, or with power cuts lasting for hours or days.

11. Civilians had to cope with prolonged disruptions of heating, electricity, gas, and water supplies, while temperatures inside homes dipped. Big cities have been particularly affected. Describing the winter of 2025 to 2026, a woman stated, *"We in Kharkiv adapted to all these inhuman attacks since 2022, but this winter was so dark and cold that all of us lost hope, and we could not stop thinking if we would survive this night, this day, this week..."*.

1. Large-scale disruptions

12. The winter of 2025 to 2026 was particularly difficult for civilians due to the intensity of attacks on energy infrastructure during harsh winter conditions. Since the attacks targeted plants crucial for the central heating system, hundreds of thousands of households were left without heating. According to testimonies, the disruptions of the heating service were particularly significant from the end of December 2025 to the end of February 2026. Heating was not available for days or weeks during the coldest months.

13. In addition to the lack of heating, millions had no electricity at all during certain periods of time or were affected by long power cuts. In many areas electricity was supplied for an average of two hours per day, often at night. Affected residents used this short time to minimally heat their dwellings through emergency electric heaters, by using the electric oven, or warming water. A woman from Kyiv stated, *"Until 9 January, the living conditions were more or less manageable, we still had electricity 2 or 3 hours a day. But after the massive attack on 9 January, all went out: heating, water, electricity. Everything pitch black in the whole neighbourhood."*

14. Homes with shattered windows due to previous explosive weapons attacks, where the owners had no means for repairs, were exposed to even harsher conditions. A woman explained that she replaced the broken windows by temporary wooden panels. However, these did not provide proper insulation against the cold.

15. Depending on the location, gas supply was also interrupted. Those who still had gas could find some relief by warming the kitchen with stoves and preparing hot water bottles. Without gas, they could not resort to these coping mechanisms. Water supply often depends on electric pumps, and the absence of electricity resulted in unavailability of water.

16. In addition to exposing civilians to extreme cold, these disruptions affected residents' capacity to cook using electric or gas stoves, store food in fridges, preserve medications at proper temperatures, or use some medical devices. Additionally, prolonged disruptions of water affected hygiene conditions. Residents were unable to wash, use toilets, or clean.

³ A/HRC/52/62, paras. 40-43; A/HRC/52/CRP.4, paras. 267-282.

2. Civilian suffering

17. Persons affected by these major disruptions described life conditions during the 2025-2026 winter as unbearable, with indoor temperatures dropping to almost 0°C in some cases. Prolonged exposure to cold, lack of basic utilities, and the need to constantly devise survival strategies have placed a considerable strain on the physical and mental health of civilians. Even if they had suffered disruptions since 2022, interlocutors said that they could not have possibly been prepared for a crisis of such magnitude and scale. A woman stated, *“The last winter cannot be compared to anything in the past”*.

a) Impact on the physical health of civilians

18. According to multiple interviews, persons living in the affected areas have developed various health conditions as a consequence of prolonged exposure to cold. The impact was harshest on the economically vulnerable who could not afford alternative heating sources.

19. Since October 2025, the Ukrainian authorities have documented deaths caused by low temperatures in homes, and even in hospitals. Medical personnel from hospitals reported that during the past winter, they attended to patients who developed cold-related trauma, including various degrees of frostbite and hypothermia. The patients had developed these conditions at home, due to exposure to unheated premises and required hospitalisation. They were mostly older persons who lived on their own. According to a medical doctor, in one fatal case, the victim sustained “frostbite to the feet and developed sepsis due to the extended stay in cold temperatures”.

20. Prolonged exposure to cold temperatures in their homes led many persons of all ages, including children, to develop other health conditions, such as chronic and acute respiratory diseases, cardiovascular stress, heart attacks and strokes, skin afflictions, as well as various reproductive health issues. Those who had to care for sick parents at home, emphasised the particular challenges in doing so during major heating, electricity, and water outages.

21. The lack of heating and electricity affected those who suffered from pre-existing health conditions, in particular of a respiratory nature, and those who depend on powered medical devices for their health and survival. An organization providing support to children with cancer and their families explained that the exposure to cold temperatures exacerbated their illness. Two older women who suffered from high blood pressure said that their blood pressure rose to dangerously high levels. The lack of electricity also affected the safe storage of medicine.

22. Moreover, Ukrainian authorities informed the Commission that during the past winter there was an increase in the number of traffic accidents during unscheduled power cuts and of deaths and injuries related to the use of coping strategies at home. These incidents resulted from carbon monoxide poisoning, accidents with electric generators, and fires provoked by space heaters.

b) Impact on older persons and persons with reduced mobility

23. Older persons and those with reduced mobility, notably those from poor economic backgrounds or residing on higher floors, have been severely affected by the lack of heating, electricity, and water. Because of the risk to remain trapped in elevators in case of a sudden power cut, these persons often had no other choice than to stay in their apartments during the entire energy crisis. This exposed them to additional risks. They could not go to a safe place during air raid alerts. The lack of mobility caused even more far-reaching limitations in the access of these persons to essential services or possible coping mechanisms during the crisis. They relied entirely on others for their survival. An older person stated, *“I lay cold and hungry, without medicine, without anything”*. Another older person described this period as *“simply fear”* and said that she just stayed at home and cried. A medical doctor told the Commission that some older persons living alone and having mobility challenges resorted to calling hospitals for help. The hospital where he worked admitted those persons during periods of extreme cold for their survival.

c) Impact on medical facilities

24. Although medical facilities are equipped with generators, during the last heating season, some smaller hospitals and clinics were affected by the power cuts owing to

generators having insufficient capacity, breaking down, or due to fuel shortages. This caused delays in the planning of medical consultations, surgeries, procedures using equipment, such as X-rays and ultrasounds, transportation of patients to hospitals, and impacted the safe storage of medicine, vaccines, blood, and embryos.

25. Energy disruptions also resulted in patients having to endure cold temperatures in hospitals and clinics. A woman described the challenges of caring for her mother, terminally ill with cancer during periods of prolonged power cuts. While there was still electricity in the hospital, there was no heating, and she was freezing during her chemotherapy treatment lasting 4 to 6 hours. She passed away in February 2026. In another situation, a woman with cystic fibrosis had to be hospitalised but asked to be discharged earlier as she could no longer stand the cold.

d) Impact on families with children

26. Life conditions were particularly difficult for families with children. At times of acute energy crisis, many schools closed or switched to remote learning, which disrupted education. Children had to remain at home for long periods and fell sick from the cold. One woman said, *“you could see the steam coming out of the children’s mouths”* in the apartment. With many men having been mobilised, women were disproportionately affected by the energy crisis. They bore a disproportionate share of the additional responsibilities, having to care for the survival of their families and working remotely, which led to additional stress.

27. Many persons moved away temporarily from the most affected areas and returned in spring. However, only those who had the means could do this. Many others did not have the possibility to leave.

e) Impact on the mental health of civilians

28. Prolonged and unpredictable power cuts had a significant impact on the mental health of persons of all ages. Many among those interviewed, including persons who considered themselves healthy, experienced considerable mental strain because of the difficult living conditions. Interlocutors described being deeply affected by the combined effects of the cold, the dark, the uncertainty, and the fear, with all their thoughts oriented on survival. They developed stress, depression, anxiety, exhaustion, insomnia; some required anti-depressants. A woman said, *“You have to understand that the most difficult part is not the physical part but the psychological toll that those constant power cuts inflict on regular residents. I, myself, have to take anti-depressants to simply live on”*. Another woman stated, *“You cannot do anything else. All your energy is focused on survival only.”* For some of the interlocutors, the psychological trauma outlasted the winter. A young woman noted, *“I constantly have meltdowns when thinking about winter and I really start shivering when I think about the coming winter”*. A man described his efforts to remain awake through the night out of fear of falling asleep and dying from the cold. He stated, *“the scariest thing was to fall asleep and not to wake up; it was like torture to be scared of dying from cold”*.

3. Responsible officials

29. On 10 October 2022, the day of the first large-scale attack on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, President Putin declared that these attacks were launched “at the proposal of the Defence Ministry and in accordance with the plan of [the] General Staff”.⁴ He has subsequently made several other statements concerning instructions to commit attacks against Ukraine’s energy infrastructure (see, for instance, para. 7). Based on the evidence the Commission has collected over the years, those responsible for planning and overseeing the large-scale attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure have been Mr. Sergey Shoigu, former Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation until May 2024, and Mr. Andrey Belousov, who succeeded him, as well as Mr. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation.⁵ During the entire period, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and more particularly Mr. Gerasimov have provided regular public updates

⁴ Official website of the President of the Russian Federation, “Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council”, 10 October 2022.

⁵ See International Criminal Court, Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants Against Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu and Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov, 25 June 2024.

concerning the continuation of large-scale attacks against Ukraine's energy infrastructure by the Russian armed forces, referring to the plan of General Staff.⁶

4. Concluding observations

30. The Russian armed forces have continued large-scale attacks targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure for over four years, with increased intensity and geographical scope. As the cold season of 2026 sets in, those attacks have again intensified. Due to their incremental effect over the years, the attacks have affected larger numbers of civilians. The accumulated impact of disruptions has strained the capacity of the civilian population to cope with a crisis of increasing magnitude and scale.

31. Russian authorities have claimed in official statements and declarations that the large-scale attacks have targeted energy infrastructure objects that are military or that serve a dual use purpose. Considering the wide geographic spread of the attacks, their demonstrated consequences on the population over time, and the fact that some of the objects targeted have a civilian use, the Commission has concluded that the facilities targeted included objects that were not military objectives, but civilian. International humanitarian law prohibits attacks against civilian objects.⁷

32. Based on the evidence available, the Commission assesses that the commanders ordering the attacks had the knowledge that the heating facilities that were targeted in large civilian agglomerations were indispensable to the civilian population, in particular during the winter. Due to the extensive public coverage on the dire consequences of the energy crisis, perpetrators had ample knowledge about the suffering of the population as a consequence of the waves of attacks. Therefore, the Commission concludes that within the waves of attacks carried out by Russian armed forces against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, those attacks that were directed at civilian objects indispensable to the civilian population are unlawful and amount to war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against the civilian objects.⁸

33. Further, the broad geographical scope and repetition, by the Russian armed forces, of the large-scale attacks against Ukraine's energy infrastructure confirm their widespread and systematic character. The intensification of the attacks during cold periods, as the predictable impact of the damage on civilians manifested itself, demonstrates the intent of the Russian authorities to inflict harm to the civilian population in Ukraine. Multiple official declarations by the Russian authorities concerning the attacks, the existence of a plan for their commission, and the evolution of the *modus operandi* over four years, demonstrate that the attacks have been committed pursuant to a state policy to deprive civilians from essential energy supplies and cause suffering. Repeated waves of high intensity attacks have inflicted considerable damage on Ukraine's energy system and heavily strained the country's repair capacities. The consequent outages and prolonged disruptions have been a direct cause of great suffering, both physical and mental, affecting the civilian population, as demonstrated in the present report. The widening geographic scale, the increased intensity, and the repeated character of the attacks have had an incremental impact on the number of civilians affected and the compound scale of civilian suffering. The Commission therefore concludes that through the large-scale attacks targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure, the Russian authorities have committed the crime against humanity of other inhumane acts.⁹

B. Attacks by Ukrainian armed forces on energy infrastructure in the Russian Federation and in the occupied areas of Ukraine

⁶ See for instance, Official website of the President of the Russian Federation, "Visit to the command post of the group of forces "West"", 20 November 2025.

⁷ Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol I, art. 52.

⁸ Rome Statute, art. 8(2)(b)(ii). The Commission notes that the International Criminal Court has reached the same legal conclusion in 2024, see <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-sergei-kuzhugetovich-shoigu-and-situation-in-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-sergei-ivanovich-kobylash-and-viktor-nikolayevich-sokolov> | International Criminal Court.

⁹ Rome Statute, art. article 7(1)(k). The International Criminal Court has also reached this legal conclusion, see fn. 8.

34. Ukrainian armed forces have also attacked energy-related infrastructure in the Russian Federation and in Russian controlled areas of Ukraine. For instance, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), from October 2025 to March 2026, Ukrainian armed forces struck electricity generation, transmission and distribution facilities in all Russian occupied oblasts of Ukraine.¹⁰ During the past heating season, Russian authorities have reported that Ukrainian armed forces' attacks against electricity and heating infrastructure in the Belgorod Oblast of the Russian Federation have caused heating, electricity and water outages, leading to deteriorating living conditions for civilians.

35. According to media reports, in June and July 2026, the Ukrainian armed forces carried out sustained attacks targeting Crimea's power facilities and fuel installations.¹¹ Moreover, in June 2026, in a post on Facebook explaining the next operational steps, Mr. Robert Brovdi, commander of the Unmanned System Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, declared, *"Ukrainians in the occupied territory, sorry in advance for the constant anxiety: closed bridges/roads, darkness, quiet, and stress"*.¹² From July to September 2026, the operation "Crimean Switch-Off" was carried out with drones, and targeted energy infrastructure facilities in different occupied areas of Ukraine. The damage following these attacks has reportedly led to extensive power outages and water shortages, as well as difficult living conditions for civilians.

36. The Commission has been unable to further investigate the impact of such attacks due to lack of access and response to its questions by the Russian Federation.

III. Recruitment of foreign nationals to serve in the Russian armed forces

37. Further to its March 2026 report, the Commission has continued to investigate the recruitment of foreign nationals to fight in the armed conflict in Ukraine. Since the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022, thousands of foreigners have joined the Russian armed forces or the Ukrainian armed forces. While many joined voluntarily, others were recruited through coercion or deception. In its present report, the Commission has excluded from its consideration situations where persons joined both armed forces knowingly and voluntarily. It has focused its investigations on recruitment in violation of international law. The Commission found compelling evidence that Russian armed forces have been recruiting large numbers of nationals from different countries around the world, through deception or coercion, to fight along with their forces. It did not find instances of deception or coercion in the recruitment of foreign nationals by the Ukrainian armed forces.

38. Since 2024, there have been clear patterns of recruitment of foreign nationals from particular countries and geographic regions to serve in the Russian armed forces. The Commission has investigated the recruitment of nationals from 48 countries and has found evidence of recruitment into the Russian armed forces through deception or coercion of nationals from 29 countries, including Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Brazil, Botswana, Cameroun, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, Honduras, India, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. It has also examined credible allegations concerning similar recruitment from many other countries. The victims were all men aged between 18 and 60 years. They came mostly from vulnerable and marginalised communities, with a poor economic background and a low education level.

39. The Commission has identified two types of situations in which foreign nationals were deceived or coerced to join the Russian armed forces: in the first situation they were recruited from abroad, while in the second situation they were already present for various reasons in the Russian Federation.

¹⁰ Office of the High Commissioners for Human Rights, "Attacks against Ukraine's Energy Infrastructure and Update on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine", 29 June 2026.

¹¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Protection of civilians in armed conflict, June 2026.

¹² Post on Facebook, 21 June 2026.

40. As regards foreign citizens recruited abroad, men from different countries have been deceived and lured to the Russian Federation with false promises of employment. Recruiting agents operating in different geographic regions have advertised fake jobs offering high salaries, have misled recruits as to the true nature of the work, and organised their travel to the Russian Federation. The Commission found similar methods of recruitment in different countries or regions, coordinated actions between recruiting agents and the Russian authorities, and a uniform approach once the recruits reached the Russian Federation. Soon after arrival, the men were forced to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to serve in the Russian armed forces.

41. With respect to recruitment from within the Russian Federation, foreign nationals who were already there for various reasons and found themselves in vulnerable situations, have been coerced or deceived by different Russian authorities to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, also to serve in the Russian armed forces.

42. The vast majority of men recruited in these situations had no military experience. Most of them did not understand the Russian language and hence the terms of the contracts. Signature was obtained in an environment marked by significant coercion. The recruits expressed shock and disbelief when they realised that they had to serve as soldiers. One victim reported that recruits were told, *"if you want to join the profession you are interested in, you need to serve for one year"*. The mother of a recruit stated that her son called her and said, *"I am being told that I must sign, it is either I sign or I die"*.

43. The men were assigned to dangerous duties on the frontlines in Ukraine. Many were killed or went missing in action, shortly after deployment, while others were injured or captured. Families had to cope with the traumatic experience of searching from afar. Those who uncovered the death of their loved one, often learnt this from social media or from other recruits.

44. Government authorities of several countries have publicly acknowledged that some of their citizens have been deceived and recruited to fight with the Russian armed forces. Several countries have issued public alerts warning citizens concerning the dangers of such recruitment and have launched investigations into recruitment networks. Victims and their families have faced significant difficulties in obtaining any form of assistance.

45. In its investigations, the Commission has relied on 245 testimonies of recruits who have been captured by Ukrainian authorities or who managed to return to their countries, as well as their family members, legal representatives, local authorities, researchers, or journalists. It has also collected relevant documents, including copies of invitation letters, travel itineraries, flight tickets and visas of the recruits, entry documents and hotel reservations in the Russian Federation, as well as official statements issued by countries concerned. It has obtained copy of contracts and official documents of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation confirming that the recruits were serving in the Russian armed forces. The Commission has addressed 69 letters to countries regarding this issue and has only received 6 responses.

A. Recruitment from abroad

1. Job offers

46. Men who had been recruited from abroad responded to advertisements on social media for civilian jobs in the Russian Federation, or were approached by recruiting agents or companies advertising such jobs. The recruiters offered them civilian work as security guards, drivers, mechanics, electricians, constructors, welders, repairmen, transporters, or technicians. More rarely, job offers concerned specific opportunities that matched the profile of the recruit, in areas concerning information technology, medicine, sports, or agriculture. For instance, a professional sportsman in his country said that a colleague at his work told him that the Russian Federation was recruiting athletes from abroad for its teams and introduced him to a man who was in fact a recruiting agent. The man was even told that he could first travel to the Russian Federation and only sign "if he likes the deal". Once in the Russian Federation, he was handed over to the military. The vast majority of interlocutors interviewed by the Commission confirmed that those lured to the Russian Federation with false promises of civilian work did not have previous military experience and had no reason

to suspect that the job would involve combat. In some cases, recruiters proposed jobs to be carried out for the military, but clarified that these would be purely civilian, such as security guard, mechanic, construction, cook, or driver.

47. The employment offers were attractive, as they came with promise of high salaries, Russian citizenship, comfortable accommodation in the Russian Federation, a pension upon separation, and other benefits. Some received a catalogue or photographs showing options for their future accommodation. Jobs were often described as a gateway for further opportunities in the Russian Federation.

48. According to testimonies, these offers appeared genuine and credible. Recruits often hailed from poor economic backgrounds, had a low level of education, were jobless, or had financial problems, and were thus motivated to accept. They saw no reason to suspect fraud. Victims of recruitment trusted the offers because of positive reassurances by the recruiters, previous positive experiences of working abroad, feedback from others claiming to have been employed in the same jobs, Government clearances produced by the recruiting agency, or because a credible recruitment process had been organised prior to departure. In some cases, the recruits have been lured by persons whom they knew, even by one politician in their country, with strong connections in the Russian Federation. Some of the recruits received official invitation letters from civilian companies in the Russian Federation and official clearances from their country's authorities to work with these companies through a specific recruiting agency. One such letter of invitation for a group of 30 recruits, came with a letter of guarantee confirming future employment in the company and guaranteeing that the workers *"will not be sent to the Russia-Ukraine war conflict zone to join Russian Army and take part in Russian special operation in Ukraine"*. From this group, thus far 17 men died at the front, 5 are missing, and one managed to return after having been injured.

2. Travel arrangements

49. After accepting the job offer, the men were pressured to travel quickly, usually in the space of a few days. The recruiting agents processed visas and plane tickets, booked accommodation, and arranged other logistical details. Travel documentation was organized in various ways depending on the particular countries or regions, as agents adjusted to local requirements. Some of the recruits had to process business visas, others received short-term tourist visas, while others needed no visa at all. For instance, the Commission received copies of business visas given to Bangladeshi recruits, with mention that they had been invited by a civilian company in the Russian Federation. Kenyan recruits received tourist visas for durations ranging from two weeks to four months, despite travelling for work. Recruits from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Peru were instructed by the recruiting agency to travel without a visa, with paperwork presenting the trip as a tourist tour in Türkiye or in the Russian Federation.

50. Agents usually required a commission to cover costs and expenses for travel arrangements, ranging from \$400 and up to \$8000, depending on the geographic area, to be paid prior to travelling or to be deducted from the subsequent salary of the recruit.

51. As travel began, recruits often discovered that they were part of a group of men recruited in similar circumstances. According to testimonies and documents obtained, flights to the Russian Federation transited via Bahrain, Brazil, Ethiopia, France, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Oman, Panama, Spain, Türkiye, or the United Arab Emirates, with some of the agents accompanying or meeting the recruits in transit. In some cases, recruits were instructed to first travel by road to a neighbouring country and take a flight from there, to avoid detection at airports.

3. Recruiting agents

52. Recruitment drives across continents have been run by agents or agencies coordinating the recruitment in a specific country or geographic region with corresponding agents in transit locations or in the Russian Federation. The Commission's investigation found that agents were either nationals from the country of recruitment or from the region, or Russian nationals, often operating through agencies. The agents or agencies are based in the countries of recruitment, or of the region, in countries of transit, or in the Russian Federation. The agencies have misrepresented the nature of their work, describing their

services as related to travel and tourism. These agencies often presented themselves as legitimate and Government-endorsed, and some of them had licenses in the countries where they operated. Visas for the recruits were issued by Russian embassies in the respective countries, often processed through the agents. Some of the agents undertook international travel to accompany or meet groups of recruits. The agents received financial incentives through commissions paid by the recruits or deducted from their salaries (see para. 62). Some countries have conducted investigations and, on this basis, arrested local or foreign recruiting agents, including of Russian nationality (see para. 72).

4. Signature of contract with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation

53. From the moment of their arrival at Russian airports, the recruits no longer had freedom of movement. They were taken by corresponding agents in the Russian Federation, transported and placed in a temporary accommodation, and handed over to the Russian armed forces. Hours or days after arrival, the recruits were compelled to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, which bound them to serve in the Russian armed forces for one year. The contracts were written only in Russian language. Victims of recruitment and their families told the Commission that they had no knowledge of Russian and therefore did not understand the terms of the contracts. The signature was obtained under duress, in a highly coercive environment, where the men had no other choice than to sign. A recruit stated, *"They just asked me to sign, the whole document was in Russian, I could not even read my own name. I only understood it was for one year"*. Several recruits had their phones confiscated just before the contract signing and could not use the translation function. Passports and driving licenses were also often taken away.

54. The Commission obtained copies of contracts, which were all identical, regardless of the country or region of origin of the recruits. They are titled, "Contract for conscription to military service in the Russian armed forces", "in the name of the Russian Federation" and "with the Ministry of Defence". The Commission also obtained documents bearing the letterhead and stamp of the Russian Ministry of Defence, certifying that the concerned person is serving with the Russian armed forces.

55. The men recruited were in a state of shock upon discovering that they had been enrolled to serve in the military. Given the insurmountable language barrier, they realised this at different points in time, while signing the contract, or even at a later stage. The wife of a recruited man said, *"he told me he is now in the Russian army – I asked him why and he told me even he doesn't know why"*.

56. Some understood that they would be serving as active members of the Russian armed forces only upon arrival at a military base or during the actual military training. *"This is when I started to worry"* said one recruit. Another man described seeing military uniforms and said, *"then I started to realize I was in some kind of place that was preparing men to go to war"*. Another man recounted that the agent who brought his group of recruits to the military base said, *"I wish you success guys. Remember your mission is to stay alive, come back alive"*. He then left and they never saw him again. Some of the recruits were compelled to sign the contracts only after arrival at a military camp.

57. Those who refused to sign the contract were forced to do so through significant coercion and acts or threats of violence. A man who tried to resist stated, *"They took me 100 metres away, shot four Russians in my presence, and told me if you don't sign, you are the next"*. After that he signed. Some hoped to be able to negotiate their release, flee, or escape at different stages, but this was almost impossible, as the camps were well guarded and the recruits were being watched and threatened. Moreover, they did not speak Russian, nor did they have money or documents. One man was told by a fellow recruit, *"the moment you try to escape you lose your life"*. Only in very exceptional cases recruits managed to resist or to flee, despite being subjected to grave coercion or violence.

B. Recruitment of foreigners from within the Russian Federation

58. Foreign citizens present in the Russian Federation, for various reasons, have also been recruited into the Russian armed forces through coercion or deception. The Commission documented situations where men who had been detained in police stations or centres for the temporary detention of foreign nationals, or serving sentences in prison, have been coerced

to join the Russian armed forces. For instance, a man was accused of working without a permit, was detained, threatened, and presented a contract with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to enlist him in a military unit. He said that he gave in due to fear and pressure. In other incidents, men delivering parcels were intercepted by the police, accused of transporting drugs, and detained. They were told by police officers to sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to serve in the military, if they wanted to avoid criminal prosecution, lengthy sentences, solitary confinement, or violent treatment.

59. According to interviews, foreign nationals who served criminal sentences in Russian Federation prisons received regular visits by staff of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, who offered them contracts with the Russian armed forces. Personnel of the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation subjected those who refused to sign to various forms of pressure, including detention in inhuman conditions, solitary confinement, threats of violence, and extension of their sentences. The men interviewed told the Commission that they finally signed the contracts under fear and pressure.

60. Other testimonies concerned instances of recruitment of foreign nationals who were already in the Russian Federation through deception, after false reassurances that they would work in a civilian function for the army. In one situation, a man who responded to an advertisement for a civilian job in the Russian Federation was twice brought by the prospective employer to the Military Commissariat. The man was surprised and each time refused to work with the military. Recruiters assured him that this would be a civilian job, even if it would fall under the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. Once he signed a contract, a person in military uniform told him to forget about the civilian position and sent him to the front. In two other situations, men detained in the Russian Federation signed only after relentless insistence by the authorities, and assurances that they would be performing civilian jobs in the army. One of them explained that he was in disbelief when he ended up in a storm brigade on the frontline. He stated, *"I am not a soldier, I am a cook. I did not want to be here. I still do not understand how I ended up on the frontline."* He was injured seven times.

C. Military training and opening of a bank account

61. All the men recruited underwent basic "military training", ranging from 20 minutes to a few days, and up to one month. The mother of a recruit said that during the military training he cried every time he spoke with her on the phone, *"he called every other day, he cried for help that I could not offer"*.

62. The recruits were usually taken to open a bank account; many also received a Russian sim card. The victims and their families pointed to multiple concerns regarding payments, including never having received any, having been paid a limited amount, unauthorised withdrawals from their account, the salary being withheld, or the account being blocked, or not accessible. In several cases, the agents or the military personnel confiscated the bank cards of the recruits or kept a second bank card with access to the account and withdrew money.

D. Deployment on frontlines

63. The men recruited were subsequently deployed in different areas of the frontline in Ukraine. There they were made to dig trenches, secure territory, gather and bury bodies and body parts of men killed, distribute food and water to soldiers, but mainly to carry out assaults and advance on the frontline. The recruits were subjected to similar patterns of treatment as documented by the Commission with respect to Russian soldiers: punishment inflicted by commanders, including detention, beatings, and threats to be killed. During operations, drones were watching to prevent them from going back. They spent days without eating and washing.¹³

64. The foreign recruits were often paired with Russian soldiers and had to advance under drone guidance. Victims of recruitment testified about the death or injury of fellow recruits, and of other soldiers. The majority of those recruited have been killed, went missing, while

¹³ A/HRC/61/61, paras. 56-59.

others have also been injured or captured. Victims of recruitment testified about the death or injury of fellow recruits, and of other soldiers. Some reported that out of their group of recruits, almost all had died on frontlines.

E. Surrender or capture

65. Many foreign recruits have surrendered or were captured by the Ukrainian armed forces, thereby acquiring the status of prisoners of war. Several among those captured reported that they were subjected to various forms of violence by the Ukrainian authorities at the initial stage of detention, during transport or interrogation, including beatings, electric shocks, mock executions, and threats. They also reported that Ukrainian authorities filmed them in order to publicly display the footage to dissuade others from joining the Russian armed forces.

66. Among the recruits detained by Ukrainian authorities, several expressed the hope that they can be transferred to their home countries but feared prosecution there for having joined a foreign army. Many were afraid of possible repatriation to the Russian Federation. Others preferred repatriation to the Russian Federation, due to fear of prosecution in their home countries, and to claim the payments that were promised to them.

F. Impact on the victims and their families

67. The recruitment into the Russian armed forces through deception or coercion has irreversible consequences on the lives of those recruited and their families. Many recruits were killed, are still missing, or suffered from serious injuries. For those who have been captured, it is unclear if they may be transferred to their home countries and under which modalities. The few who managed to return suffer severe psychological consequences and long-lasting injuries or disabilities. They are often in a difficult economic situation as they have no work, since many resigned from previous jobs and have incurred debts to cover the recruitment commissions.

68. Families described a deep feeling of distress and helplessness.¹⁴ They usually lost contact with those recruited and were not aware of the fate of their loved ones. Their efforts to find them often did not yield results. Family members tried to call the recruiting agents but the latter stopped responding or blocked their numbers. Russian agents even threatened women who spoke out about their missing husbands.

69. Some family members were ultimately informed about the death, injury, or capture of the recruits. While some had been notified by authorities in their country, most found out in the press or in the social media, or from fellow soldiers. Many continued to search. When death was confirmed, families tried to repatriate the remains, usually without result. A woman stated, *"it is so hard, explaining to a child that your dad is gone, when they don't even see his body and bury him – they will never believe he is dead if they don't bury him"*.

70. The departure, disappearance, injury, death, or capture of the recruits has a long-lasting psychological impact on the families. They also suffer from the economic impact of having lost the primary caretaker. Some family members hoped to obtain compensation for death or to recover at least part of the man's salary, also without result.

G. Country responses

71. The families of the recruits have reached out to the local authorities in their home countries or to their embassies in the Russian Federation or in Ukraine but were usually unable to obtain meaningful assistance in ascertaining their whereabouts or obtaining their return. Some national embassies based in the Russian Federation have provided assistance in bringing back a small number of foreign nationals. In several countries, families have created joint action groups hoping that their collective voice would be heard and complained to domestic authorities. Families also addressed requests to the Russian authorities or reached out to the Russian embassy in their country, without result.

72. Some countries have formally raised the issue of the recruitment of foreign nationals with the Russian authorities. On several occasions, Russian officials have publicly denied illegal recruitment.¹⁵ Governments authorities of several countries have acknowledged that some of their citizens have been deceived and recruited to fight with the Russian armed forces, or have issued alerts warning citizens about the dangers of accepting offers of work abroad. High-ranking officials have raised awareness and called for action concerning the deceptive recruitment of their citizens into the Russian armed forces, including in their respective national parliaments, or have attempted to sponsor efforts to secure returns. National authorities of several countries have opened investigations concerning recruitment networks, including in collaboration with INTERPOL, have carried out arrests, increased surveillance at airports, and announced search efforts of missing nationals.

73. Some countries also issued public statements informing that joining the armed forces of foreign countries or other military formations may entail criminal liability, including based on laws concerning mercenary activities. The national legislations of numerous countries indeed foresee criminal responsibility for mercenary activities. However, all the situations of recruitment covered in the present report do not concern mercenaries.

74. Finally, some countries engaged in talks with Ukrainian authorities regarding victims of deceptive recruitment by the Russian Federation who are held as prisoners of war.

H. Recruitment by Ukraine

75. Recruitment of foreign nationals to fight with the Ukrainian armed forces started during the early stages of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. From the accounts collected by the Commission, persons joining the Ukrainian armed forces did so knowingly and voluntarily. The Commission interviewed foreign nationals recruited in the Ukrainian armed forces who confirmed that they joined voluntarily, that they had the opportunity to translate the contract they signed, and understood it. They received their salary.

I. Concluding observations

76. The evidence collected leads the Commission to conclude that the Russian authorities, in cooperation with recruiting agents, have trafficked persons from various geographic regions, in order to enlist them in the Russian armed forces in the context of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in violation of international human rights law. The circumstances in which the persons were lured to the Russian Federation and forced to serve on frontlines demonstrate the existence of the core elements constitutive of trafficking in persons.¹⁶

77. The victims have been lured from abroad to the Russian Federation, by agents using deception, fraud and abusing their vulnerabilities, to entice them to accept false offers of employment. Further, agents operating around the world and cooperating with the Russian authorities have organized the transfer of recruits to the Russian Federation, through processing visas and arranging international travel, often for groups of recruits. Once in the Russian Federation, corresponding agents coerced them to sign contracts they did not understand with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, and further transferred them to the Russian armed forces. Finally, the men recruited by the Russian armed forces were exploited in different areas of the frontline in Ukraine, assigned highly dangerous tasks, often resulting in death or long-lasting injuries and trauma.

78. Additional common features further demonstrate that the victims have been trafficked. Promised payments and bonuses were usually diverted by recruiting agents and military commanders, passports and phones were often confiscated, and contacts between agents and families were interrupted, once the recruits were deployed to the front. The Commission identified a similar modus operandi used in recruitment drives in different parts of the world,

¹⁵ See for instance <https://x.com/russembkenya/status/2024443743966011712/photo/1> and Консульский департамент МИД России – Telegram

¹⁶ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children art. 3.

concerning the processing of visas with local Russian embassies, the arranging of travel using specific justifications and routes, and a uniform approach once the recruits reach the Russian Federation, culminating with the signature of contracts with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and the deployment on frontlines in Ukraine. The repetition of the same methods of recruitment demonstrates a high degree of coordination between agents operating around the world and the Russian authorities.

79. The situation in which the recruits were placed violates their fundamental human rights, including the rights to life, freedom, health, and to be treated humanely.¹⁷

80. Further, through the signature of contracts to serve within the Russian armed forces, regardless of the circumstances, the victims of trafficking became part of the Russian military. They are thus not mercenaries, and laws on mercenaries do not apply to their situation. As such, they became members of the Russian armed forces and acquired combatant status. Therefore, in case of capture or surrender, the Third Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war and the protection it provides applies to these persons until the end of the armed conflict, according to international humanitarian law.

IV. Recommendations

81. **The recommendations made in previous reports remain relevant.**

82. **The Commission recommends that the Russian Federation:**

(a) **Cease attacking objects of energy infrastructure that are civilian in nature or indispensable to the civilian population. When identifying military objectives, including energy infrastructure that may qualify as a lawful military objective, comply strictly with obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of distinction and proportionality, and take all feasible precautions in the conduct of military operations to avoid, and in any event minimise, incidental civilian harm;**

(b) **End the recruitment of foreign nationals – whether abroad or within the territory of the Russian Federation – into the Russian armed forces through inducement, deception, coercion or any other means that vitiate free and informed consent;**

(c) **Immediately discharge all foreign nationals, victims of trafficking, currently serving in its armed forces and provide them with appropriate protection and assistance;**

(d) **Engage with States whose nationals are victims of trafficking in order to address the situation of everyone, including those who have been wounded or killed, while ensuring the informed participation of the families in identifying and implementing individual solutions consistent with international law, including applicable human rights standards;**

(e) **Investigate and prosecute persons responsible for such recruitment, in the Russian Federation or abroad, and collaborate with national jurisdictions, including those that have initiated investigations.**

83. **The Commission recommends that Ukraine:**

(a) **Engage with States whose nationals are victims of trafficking and are currently held as prisoners of war in Ukraine in order to determine and implement appropriate arrangements addressing their specific situation, including through transfer to their country of origin, in compliance with the Third Geneva Convention;**

(b) **In all decisions concerning the transfer, exchange or repatriation of prisoners of war who are victims of trafficking, conduct an assessment of any protection risks and respect the principle of non-refoulement;**

¹⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, arts. 6(1), 7, 9; International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, art. 12.

(c) Ensure that prisoners of war who are victims of trafficking are afforded, from the moment of their capture or surrender, all protections and guarantees provided under the Third Geneva Convention.

84. The Commission recommends that States whose nationals have been trafficked to join the Russian armed forces:

(a) Ratify the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), and review and amend domestic legislation on trafficking in persons to bring it into full conformity with international standards;

(b) Cooperate with the authorities of the Russian Federation to secure the discharge from military service of all their nationals who are victims of trafficking, and to address the situation of everyone, including those who have been wounded or killed, while ensuring the informed participation of their families in identifying and implementing individual solutions consistent with international law, including applicable human rights standards;

(c) Ensure the effective investigation and prosecution of all individuals responsible for trafficking in persons for recruitment into the Russian armed forces, including by making full use of international legal assistance and cooperation mechanisms;

(d) Develop awareness campaigns to prevent further recruitment through inducement, deception, coercion or any other means;

(e) Engage with the Ukrainian authorities to ensure that individual solutions are found for nationals who are victims of trafficking and currently held as prisoners of war in Ukraine, including, where appropriate, transfer to their country of origin in compliance with the Third Geneva Convention;

(f) Refrain from prosecuting nationals who were recruited into or served in the Russian armed forces as a result of trafficking, and ensure that they are recognized and treated as victims of trafficking in accordance with international standards.

85. The Commission recommends that the international community:

(a) Continue to provide support to address the severe humanitarian consequences for the civilian population of attacks against energy infrastructure, including their impact on physical and mental health, access to essential services, and overall living conditions; and

(b) Support, where appropriate, the effective investigation and prosecution of individuals responsible for recruitment into the Russian armed forces, as trafficking may involve persons from and infrastructure located in, or transiting through, various countries.