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**NEW REPORT EXPLORES MISLEADING RECRUITMENT AND LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN RUSSIA’S DRONE INDUSTRY**

A new investigation by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has revealed significant concerns regarding the recruitment and labour conditions of young women brought to work in Russia’s Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The report, *“Who is Making Russia’s Drones? The Migrant Women Exploited for Russia’s War Economy”* provides an in-depth examination of misleading recruitment strategies, exploitative working conditions, and growing international scrutiny surrounding the program.

The Alabuga SEZ, located in Tatarstan, has become a key hub for Russia’s military drone production since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To sustain production, in the face of workforce shortages, the SEZ launched the Alabuga Start program, which recruits young women aged 18-22 from Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.

These recruits are enticed with promises of education, high salaries, and career advancement, but some of them find themselves working under restrictive conditions—many without prior knowledge that they would be involved in military drone production.

The report reveals that Alabuga Start has expanded its recruitment network significantly, now targeting young women in Latin America and south Asia as well as Africa.

Testimonies from workers describe long hours, constant surveillance, and hazardous working environments, with some reporting exposure to caustic chemicals without adequate protection.

Additionally, the report documents allegations of racial harassment, particularly against African workers, adding another layer of concern regarding their treatment at the facility. The risks extend beyond poor working conditions. The Alabuga SEZ itself was targeted in a Ukrainian drone strike in April 2024, which injured several foreign workers, raising questions about the safety of those recruited under false pretenses.

The investigation has also identified responses from several governments and Alabuga’s local partners. Some African nations have initiated inquiries into the program, and, in some cases, local partners have taken steps to limit recruitment or distance themselves from Alabuga Start.

The case of Alabuga Start highlights broader vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in conflict-related industries. As governments consider their responses, the report recommends stronger protections for overseas workers, increased scrutiny of recruitment agencies, and diplomatic engagement to safeguard citizens from deceptive labour schemes.

The full report is available here: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/who-is-making-russias-drones/>

**FACTSHEET – KEY FINDINGS:**

* **Recruitment expansion:** Initially targeting Africa, the Alabuga Start program has now expanded to up to 85 countries, with growing recruitment efforts in Latin America and South Asia.
* **Fraudulent and misleading recruitment:** Many participants were not fully informed about the nature of their work before arriving in Russia, with some believing they were enrolling in a work-study program.
* **Exploitative working conditions:** Reports from participants detail long hours, constant surveillance, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and broken promises about education opportunities.
* **Allegations of racial harassment:** Testimonies from African workers describe discriminatory treatment and workplace mistreatment.
* **Worker safety risks:** In April 2024, a Ukrainian drone strike on the Alabuga SEZ injured several African workers, raising further concerns about the risks faced by foreign recruits. Alabuga SEZ was targeted by Ukrainian drones as recently as 23 April.

**ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

The Global Initiative is an independent civil-society organization, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, with a globally dispersed Secretariat and a high-level advisory board. Its network members include prominent law enforcement, governance, and development practitioners dedicated to seeking new and innovative strategies and responses to organized crime.

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