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Nepal's youth caught in the crossfire

The Nepalese government is under pressure to halt the flow of recruits to the Russian army

Russia's move to recruit Nepali youths in its army in the absence of any bilateral agreements, and without informing Nepal's government has created a great deal of furore in Kathmandu. Till the second week of April this year, more than 21 Nepalis have lost their lives and dozens are trapped in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war; and around 300 youths remain out of contact with their family members. While, five Nepalis who are currently in Ukrainian captivity are waiting for early repatriation. Nepal's government does not have any accurate data about the number of Nepalis currently serving in the Russian army. An informal network of families whose members are currently recruited in the Russian army is collecting the data; the current number estimated at approximately 2 000 families.

Shrinking job spaces at home, promises of lucrative incomes, and lack of accurate information about the nature of the job seem to be some of the reasons behind their decision to accept the risky job. Additionally, growing aspirations to buy land, a home and to afford a luxurious life in a short span of time are driving many to bear any risk to make money. The chronic political instability coupled with economic recession, the impact of Covid-19, and dismal flow of foreign investment is decreasing employment opportunities in Nepal. Youths no longer see a future in their own country. The lack of job opportunities at home is a primary reason behind this sentiment. As of late, the number of Nepali workers receiving approval for foreign employment has increased and the number of people seeking permanent settlement abroad is increasing too. According to official government figures, in the fiscal year 2022-23, 70 915 Nepalis chose to move abroad, embracing permanent residency. Every day more than 2 000 youths go abroad either to study or for employment.

A large-chunk of unskilled and semiskilled migrant workers choose gulf-nations for work; Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Oman and Bahrain being on top of the list. Similarly, significant numbers of youths are traveling to Europe, the US, UK, Australia and other countries on student visas

which, to some extent, allows them to both study and make an income. Concerning a combat career, traditionally, India and the UK were recruiting Nepali nationals in their army as per bilateral arrangements but, these countries have started to decrease their quotas so that Nepali youths are seeking alternatives — joining the Russian army. Looking at the nature of the recruitments, it appears that there is a secret deal between the manpower agencies with covert support from Russian agencies, and Nepal government agencies.

Nepal's futile diplomatic efforts

At a time when Nepali youths are desperately seeking jobs, Russia came up with the offer of lucrative salaries. Many manpower agents who send Nepali workers to join, offer a NPR 3 00000 monthly salary (equivalent to around 2000 EUR) and Russian citizenship for spouses and children after a year of signing of the contract. To further lure foreign nationals, in January this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that speeds up a path to Russian citizenship for foreigners who enlist in the country's military.

It is not possible for Nepalis to receive this amount of income by working in their country or even in other developed countries. Many youths are therefore lured to accept this job despite the risks. Along with the monthly salary, manpower agents are attracting Nepalis through the promise of a life-long pension and permanent residency. After it was revealed that scores of youths who held jobs in Nepal's security agencies including the Nepalese Army left their job to join the Russian Army, Nepal's government started to take up the issue, especially once local media started to spread news of deaths of Nepali nationals, thus increasing the pressure. The stories of those who successfully escaped the war zone, and came back to Nepal clearly suggests that Nepali youths are not aware of the risks they have to face in the war-zone.

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According to accounts in local media, the primary reasons behind the deaths is the deployment of Nepalese at the frontlines of the war without providing adequate training. Many Nepalis are dying as they do not understand instructions provided by Russian commanders, the language being a barrier to communication.

Nepal is taking a series of measures to halt the recruitment of its citizens into the Russian Army — seizing to issue work permits to go to Russia.

To minimise the travel to the country, the government has implemented the provisions of producing a no-objection letter while flying from India and gulf-countries to Russia because youths used those routes. After the imposition of such provisions, authorities say, the number of Nepali youths joining the Russian army has substantially decreased, but has not completely stopped. Nepal's diplomatic efforts to resolve this issue have been in vain.

On several occasions, Nepal has requested Russia to stop the recruitment of Nepali nationals but there is no public commitment from Moscow, despite regular protests in front of the Russian Embassy in Kathmandu. There has also not been any progress in providing compensations to the family members, or to bring back dead bodies. Nepal is asking Russia to send back its citizens, scrapping their contracts, who are already serving but Russia has responded by claiming that the Nepalis do not want to return. Only few have escaped the Russian army. Russia continues to engage with Nepal's government to avoid a possible outrage from Nepali leaders. Amidst the war, Russia has come up with new proposals for collaboration, apparently to divert public attention from recruitments. The Chairman of the National Assembly, Ganesh Prasad Timalsina, visited Russia and other exchanges are taking place. Moscow has submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal stating that it is ready to expand the areas of cooperation. But, there has not been any progress on this proposal as of yet.

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Nepal, sandwiched between India and China, voted in favour of the United Nations Security Council resolution that condemned the Russian invasion. Both China and India who were absent in the time of voting are continuing with their regular business with Russia. It is contradictory on the part of Nepal; on the one hand, to send its citizens to serve in the Russian army, and on the other to condemn the invasion. The new government in Kathmandu which is largely, composed of communist parties; appears to have a slightly different approach towards the Russia-Ukraine war, and it may not produce the result as many Nepalese are expecting.

With the current government which seems to be sympathetic with Russia, highlighting Russia's legitimate security concerns, is unlikely to keep the pressure on the country. That is why there are little chances of an immediate solution. But if the government fails to resolve this issue

quickly it could invite social unrest as family members are gradually building their strength to hit the street. The long-term solution for such a situation is to create jobs at home.



Kamal Dev Bhattarai
Kathmandu

Kamal Dev Bhattarai is a Kathmandu-based journalist and writer who currently serves as an editor at Annapurna Express. He writes about Nepal's foreign policy, mainly focusing on India and China.