



The Uplifting Africa Program

10/31/2022

Wagner Group Contractors Funding Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Using African Natural Resources



Wagner Group's hardened mercenaries pictured in Eastern Ukraine
Photo Credit: The Times

Annelee Fenton
The Uplifting Africa Program
www.upliftingafrica.org

The Uplifting Africa Business Coalition

Wagner Group Contractors Funding Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Using African Natural Resources

Wagner Group Background

The practice of hiring security companies to aid with security threats is common. Groups such as the Wagner Group are private military companies that are contracted out by the highest bidder. The group has ties to many African countries including Mali, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, and Sudan.



"Wagner Group's hardened mercenaries pictured in Eastern Ukraine" Photo Credit - The Times:

The mercenary group, founded in 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin,¹ is linked to the Kremlin in Russia, though no official statement has been released by the Russian government stating such. The Russian private military security contractors (PMSC)² operate outside of Russian law and are able to expand their reach beyond the political boundaries of the Russian government. The Wagner Group has been under international speculation, particularly because of their links in Africa, with the Kremlin, and have been accused of multiple war crimes in areas where they have been deployed. During the Ukraine-Russia War, they have been brought into supplement fallen

¹ Middle East Eye Newspaper, October 6, 2022: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/wagner-group-russia-foreign-mercenaries-salaries-suffers-losses>

² <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/executive-summary-key-findings/>

Russian troops.³ The exact numbers of the group is unknown but is estimated to be between 1,000 and 5,000 members in Africa.⁴

The Group in Africa

The Wagner Group in Africa has been given attention by the US ambassador to the UN that directly named them in UN Security Council Briefing on October 6, 2020. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield states “the most immediate and growing concerns in Africa is the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group’s strategy of exploiting the natural resources of the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan, as well as other countries.”⁵ Thomas-Greenfield further describes the manner in which the Wagner Group exploits African states in return for natural resources, including diamonds, gold, timber, etc. The group in turn, uses those resources to fund the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁶ The group has the most contracts in Africa and specifically in Libya, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

It is unclear the totality of funding the Wagner Group is syphoning from African natural resources and payments to the group to the Russian Federation. In Sudan in February, there were at least 16 known smuggling flights out of Sudan operated by Russia carrying roughly one ton of gold.⁷ The company Meroe Gold is a subsidiary of Prigozhin’s investment company, extracts gold and provides “weapons and training to the country’s army and paramilitaries.”⁸ The price of one ton of Sudanese gold is worth around \$60 million.⁹ It is unclear how much gold is being smuggled out of Sudan by the Wagner Group. It is also unclear the amount of resources the company has taken across Africa. Their presence in the CAR has brought to light attacks on the gold miners across the country. The culmination of their funding for the Russian war is hard to

³ Ibid. 1.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877> and https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-wagner-group-a-russian-symphony-of-profit-and-politics

⁵ UNSC Briefing on Financing of Armed Groups and Terrorists Through the Illicit Trafficking of Natural Resources October 6, 2020: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-financing-of-armed-groups-and-terrorists-through-the-illicit-trafficking-of-natural-resources/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/06/russian-mercenaries-exploiting-africa-to-fund-war-in-ukraine>

⁷ Russia is plunder gold in Sudan to boost Putin’s war effort in Ukraine July 29, 2022: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁸ Ibid 7

⁹ Ibid 7

trace because of the smuggling of natural resources. Finding an estimate on the amount of money the group is exploiting out of Africa is extremely difficult due to the nature of natural resources. Fluctuating market pricing, unclear records of resources stolen, inability to track where the resources are going, and many other factors make it near impossible to determine how much of the Russian invasion is funded by the exploitation of African natural resources.



Russia is plundering gold in Sudan to boost Putin's war effort in Ukraine. Photo of a Soviet flag over a processing plant in the Sudanese desert.

Photo Credit: CNN World

Beyond material resources, the Wagner Group also recruits contract soldiers from African countries. They have been recruiting from Latin American, African, and Eastern Europe.¹⁰ As their members fall in Ukraine, the group will continue recruiting from all over the world and will use their power over African governments to obtain more recruitments.

The Wagner Group uses their security detail to offer African governments contracts for their services to combat local rebellions. In Mozambique, an ISIS insurgency has threatened the country's infrastructure that is reliant on natural gas reserves. The natural gas reserves in Mozambique have drawn European attention because of the desire to wean from Russian natural gas.¹¹ ISIS-Mozambique threatens the Government and therefore, foreign aid to the Mozambican government has increased. Ironically, it would not be too out of the box to think that the government is using foreign aid money to pay for mercenary groups like Wagner.

African nations, such as Mali and the Central African Republic, are looking for mercenary aid to push out French influence. The French have been the most influential European power in the region after decolonization. In an effort to push out French forces and influence, governments

¹⁰ Ibid. 1.

¹¹CNN ISIS-linked militants are threatening huge natural gas reserves the world needs badly right now October 10, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/10/africa/isis-mozambique-gas-reserves-cmd-intl/index.html>

have opened the door for the Wagner Group which exploits natural resources and is accused of committing human rights violations.¹² The Wagner Group is also providing security protection for Ibrahim Traore, the interim leader of Burkina Faso.¹³



"Maliens demonstrate against France and in support of Russia on the 60th anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Mali in 1960, in Bamako, Mali, Sept. 22, 2020. The banner in French reads: "Putin, the road to the future". Photo Credit APNews

Democracy in Africa and Spreading of Russian Influence

The presence of a Russian backed mercenary group in Africa undermines Western power in the region. The spread of the Kremlin's influence beyond Russia's border poses a threat for the stability of the existing powers already there. By relying on the aid from mercenaries, the countries are reliant upon Russian aid and become indebted to the Kremlin. The group's presence in Africa poses a threat to democracy and rule of law.¹⁴

The countries in Africa are in a fragile state and many of them are dealing with insurgent groups vying for power and control of their nation. Western aid has not been enough and governments turn to mercenary groups to counteract insurgent groups. Unfortunately to pay for services, governments pay in resources that overcompensate the Wagner Group's protection. The Wagner

¹² Inside the French Effort to Counter Russian Mercenaries in Africa October 13, 2022.

<https://www.axios.com/2022/10/13/france-west-africa-wagner-group-disinformation>

¹³ <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/10/04/the-wagner-group-putins-chef-a-nazi-obsessed-commando-and-the-story-of-the-kremlins-private-army/>

¹⁴ Brookings Institute February 8, 2022: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>

Group was awarded with diamond and gold mining licenses in the Central African Republic as compensation for their services.¹⁵ The main danger of the presence of the group in Africa is the exploitation of resources to fund the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the reliance upon Russian backed mercenary groups for security.



"A woman looks for her name on the electoral list at the polling station during the run-off of the Presidential Election in Bamako, Mali. MINUSMA/Marco Dormino



¹⁵ Ibid. 10