

The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth

This report is also available in [French](#).

After years of [denying](#) the Russian government's links to the Wagner Group, President Putin [admitted](#) in June 2023 that the Kremlin provided 86 billion rubles (approximately \$940 million in October 2023) in financial support to the group from May 2022 to May 2023. The death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeniy Prigozhin on August 23, 2023, provides an opportunity to review some of the most egregious ways in which the Russian government has lied about the role, purposes, and so-called successes of the Wagner Group. This report analyzes and counters the false claims Russia continues to spread about the Wagner Group's activities in the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Sudan, and Libya – and reveals them for what they are – criminals motivated by greed rather than an effective counterterrorism force.

The transnational criminal organization [Wagner Group's](#) exploitation of African resources, notably gold, diamonds, and timber, is only one node of its destabilizing influence across Africa. Wagner Group forces have [reportedly](#) razed entire villages and murdered civilians in the Central African Republic (CAR) to advance their economic interests in the mining sector, participated in the unlawful execution of people in Mali, raided artisanal gold mines in Sudan, and undermined democratic institutions in every country where they have worked. They have also been accused of paying their bills in counterfeit currency. This pattern of criminal behavior – and of preying on Africans – is not going to end with Yevgeny Prigozhin's death.

Wherever Wagner deploys a stark rise in civilian deaths follows. According to the [Economist](#) and recent [Armed Conflict Location and Event \(ACLED\)](#) data, violence perpetrated against civilians by Wagner Group in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) is not only frequent, but far more [deadly](#) to non-combatants than state-led or rebel force attacks. According to *The Economist*, Wagner killed at least 1,800 African civilians as of August 2023. Wagner [justifies](#) its brutal presence in Africa as “supporting peace and stability.” However, in Mali alone, terrorist violence against civilians since 2021 has [surged by 278 percent](#).

Russia's Lies in the Central African Republic

[Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem](#) falsely portrays the Wagner Group as playing a positive role in nations such as CAR. Although the Wagner Group has been deployed in CAR since 2018, Russian officials still refer to the group's forces as “Russian instructors” when discussing the group's activities, a narrative that continued after Prigozhin's death in August 2023. Russian [officials](#) quoted in Russian state-funded [media](#) claim that Russian instructors have “saved” CAR and are “strengthening peace and stability” to [bring](#) a “lasting peace.” The U.S.-sanctioned [Officer's Union of International Security \(OUIS or “COSI”\)](#) serves as a front company for Wagner Group operations in CAR. Its U.S.-sanctioned director, Aleksandr Ivanov, justifies Wagner's presence in CAR, [saying](#) “The fighters of the Wagner Group remain in CAR, so the inhabitants of the Republic can sleep peacefully! ...the Republic has become a safe place for the life and development of the local population.”

The Truth about the Wagner Group in Central African Republic

Reports from the United Nations and independent media document the truth about the Wagner Group and its brutal treatment of the people of CAR.

- [CBS reported in May 2023 that Wagner forces](#) used indiscriminate killing, abductions, and rape to gain control of a key mining area near the city of Bambari, with survivors describing the attacks in detail: “To say ‘killing’ is an understatement. It was total carnage. Like Armageddon... They spoke Russian. Even Chechen. Some wore masks and had long beards.”
- People in CAR, including journalists, aid workers and minorities, as well as international peacekeepers, have been violently harassed and threatened by so-called “Russian instructors” from the Wagner Group, UN experts [reported](#) in October 2021.
- Despite Russia and Wagner’s claims that it brings stability to the areas it operates in, the group – operating from CAR and allegedly outside of the host government’s awareness – [plotted to overthrow the government of Chad](#) in early 2023, an action that could have exacerbated an already challenging humanitarian situation for women, children, and other civilians.

Russia’s Lies in Mali

Russian officials, Russian state-funded media, and Kremlin-linked Telegram channels continuously message on the Wagner Group’s allegedly “positive” role in Mali since the group’s [deployment](#) in 2021. Despite these posts, Mali’s transition government has yet to publicly acknowledge that Wagner Group is in Mali. Propaganda [videos](#) continue to circulate online portraying Wagner Group forces as saviors and “[warrior angels](#).” Before Wagner’s deployment to Mali, Russia highlighted false narratives like those it deployed about CAR, repeating the myth that “Russian instructors” would bring peace, stability, and would also have new success at fighting counterterrorism in the country. Aleksandr Ivanov, the U.S.-[sanctioned](#) director of the OUIS, [boasted](#) to Malian news sites that the Wagner Group was “doing excellent work all over the world,” claiming it “will fight terrorism everywhere.” A Russia-linked propaganda [video](#) circulating after Wagner’s deployment to Mali, at the end of 2021, falsely suggested that the United States and France are supporting violent religious extremists in Mali.

The Truth about the Wagner Group in Mali

The facts tell a different story.

- Contrary to Russia’s claim, the Wagner Group has not been effective in countering terrorism in Mali since first deploying in December 2021. The UN Panel of Experts for Mali [reported](#) in August 2023 that ISIS-Sahel almost doubled its territorial control in Mali in less than a year. Wagner Group has failed to make Mali safer, with 2022 being the deadliest year for civilians in Mali since the current conflict broke out in 2012.
- Wagner Group forces were [captured](#) on video in April 2022 burying a dozen bodies in a mass grave near the Gossi military base in Mali. Wagner Group then produced misleadingly edited videos and attempted to falsely blame the French military for the incident, in order to increase anti-French and anti-Western sentiment in Mali.

Russia’s Lies in Sudan

Russian officials and Wagner Group representatives have repeatedly claimed that Wagner has no military presence in Sudan and that Russia is not involved in the country’s bloody civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Dagalo. Russia’s

Ministry of Foreign Affairs has stated that [Russia only desires](#) a “[peaceful resolution](#)” to the conflict. In an April 2023 [statement](#), Prigozhin [added](#): “Wagner PMC is in no way involved in the Sudanese conflict.” Russia also consistently portrays itself as a disinterested actor in Sudan, merely seeking to assist the country in strengthening its security, stability, and economic development. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, in a June 2023 meeting with Sudan’s Deputy Chairperson of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, [expressed](#) “deep concern” over the crisis. Lavrov [added](#) that “Russia is watching with concern what is happening in Sudan and is interested in helping to create the conditions for normalizing the situation.”

The Truth about the Wagner Group in Sudan

Sudanese civilians and victims of Wagner activities say otherwise.

- Wagner Group mercenaries have killed scores of Sudanese miners working in artisanal gold mines along the border between Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), [according to](#) survivors of these attacks, while they loot Sudan’s rich gold mines.
- Other survivors report that Wagner mercenaries have attacked encampments full of migrant workers and miners along the Sudanese/CAR border, shooting indiscriminately. A witness who lost his brother and six relatives at the hands of Wagner soldiers [said](#) more than 70 people were killed in a single attack.

Russia’s Lies in Libya

Russia’s state-sponsored media outlets regularly accuse NATO forces of [destroying](#) the Libyan state and of initiating the ongoing instability there in pursuit of its member states’ own interests. These propaganda outlets support Russia’s false narrative, portraying itself as an altruistic, anti-colonial power seeking only to help African countries. For years, the Russian Government [rejected](#) any claims of a Russian mercenary or military presence in Libya, with Russian MFA Spokesperson Maria Zakharova in 2020 [asserting](#) that there was “no Russian presence in Libya,” and that “PMCs are not allowed under Russian law.” Russian Government representatives [repeatedly argued](#) that accusations it had taken sides in the Libyan conflict were “lies,” and that it strove for a “ceasefire and political settlement of the conflict.” In 2020, Russian Envoy to the UN, Vassily Nebenzya, [condemned](#) accusations of Russian mercenary involvement in Libya as “largely based on unverified or spurious data and aimed at discrediting Russia’s policy on Libya. These are obviously planted stories.”

The Truth about Wagner Group in Libya

There is clear evidence that Wagner Group has inserted itself in Libya for political and financial gain, committing human rights abuses against the Libyan people and intensifying ongoing instability.

- Wagner Group, as an [admitted Russian Government](#)-backed entity, reportedly has acted contrary to UN Security Council Resolution 1970 and other relevant resolutions [by providing military equipment and mercenaries](#) to the front lines of the Libya conflict, including fighter aircraft, armored vehicles, and air defense systems. According to [U.S. Africa Command \(AFRICOM\)](#), at least 14 Mig-29s and Su-24s were painted over to disguise their Russian marks of origin and then flown from Russia’s bases in Syria to Libya. Wagner Group is “prolonging conflict responsible for the needless suffering and the deaths of innocent civilians,” AFRICOM has [stated](#).
- The Wagner Group [placed](#) landmines and boobytraps while withdrawing from Tripoli in 2020, according to public reporting. Mines and other explosive ordnance [reportedly](#) killed

or wounded more than 300 people in Libya between May 2020 and March 2022, including in areas formerly controlled by Wagner Group forces. The UN Fact-Finding Mission in Libya's (FFM's) [final report](#) indicates that Wagner forces placed “military explosives in homes, inside sofas and bathroom fixtures, and other civilian areas, which led to death and injury of civilians.” The FFM determined that Wagner personnel “may have violated the international law principle of proportionality and the obligation to minimize the indiscriminate effects of mines and other explosives” as well as “violating the right to life” of Libyans by not clearing the ordnance for the safety of civilians.

- Wagner [conducted](#) disinformation campaigns in Libya in an attempt to boost support for Russian-allied figures who oppose the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, according to the African Center for Strategic Studies. Wagner built a social media apparatus in Libya to promote Haftar, Saif al-Islam Gadhafi, and other political figures whom the Kremlin believed could become future clients of Russia, using methods reminiscent of previous Prigozhin-led interference in other foreign elections, [according to](#) the Stanford Internet Observatory. Wagner created at least 12 different Facebook groups to manipulate Libyan public opinion, and these pages were viewed by over two million users each week. Wagner [also purchased 50% of the former Libyan state-run broadcasting company, A1 Jamahiriya TV](#), transferring its studios to a location overseas and renewing its broadcasts into Libya.

Russia is Responsible

Russia's disinformation and propaganda [ecosystem](#) continues to deploy false narratives such as those outlined above to deflect attention from and avoid responsibility for the Wagner Group's human rights abuses and atrocities.

The Kremlin-backed Wagner Group exploits insecurity to expand Russia's presence in Africa for political influence and financial gain. In doing so, they threaten stability and human rights on the continent. In January 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department [designated](#) Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization for committing, among other egregious acts, “an ongoing pattern of serious criminal activity, including mass executions, rape, child abductions, and physical abuse in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali.”