**3/18/24; Conned into the Russian army**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

HALEEMA SHAH (GUEST HOST): Russia held its elections this weekend and Vladimir Putin was -- unsurprisingly -- declared president.

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HALEEMA: The Kremlin says it’s a sign that Russians broadly approve of his war in Ukraine, which is now in its second year. Accurate polling on that is hard to come by, though. What we *do* know for sure is this: both countries are suffering from a troop shortage. And Russia has a strategy to refill its ranks.

*SHALU YADAV (INDEPENDENT REPORTER): Yes, it is actually happening on a big scale, you know, not just from India and Nepal, but from countries like, you know, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan…*

HALEEMA: But last week, India said its citizens weren’t voluntarily signing up for the Russian military…they were trafficked.

*<CLIP> Hindustan Times, India Talks Tough To Russia*

*Central Bureau of Investigation: Several Indian nationals have been duped to work with the Russian army.*

HALEEMA: Coming up, Russia’s accidental mercenaries. And how they disguise the *real* cost of war.

SCORING OUT

**[THEME]**

HALEEMA: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Haleema Shah filling in as guest host today. Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War, reports have trickled in about men from thousands of miles away signing up to fight on the frontlines…in exchange for a paycheck. But last week, things came to a head in India – one of the countries where some of these men are recruited from.

SHALU: The Indian government recently warned its citizens against job offers in the Russian army.

HALEEMA: This is Shalu Yadav, she’s an independent journalist in Delhi who worked on an investigation into the South Asian men fighting Russia’s war.

SHALU: India's investigative agency, known as the Central Bureau of Investigation, or the CBI, busted a network of agents and visa consultants who had been sending people to Russia on the pretext of giving them jobs.

HALEEMA: You know, I think a lot of people might know that India and a lot of South Asian countries have a very large population of young men who go abroad to work, send money home, and will periodically come home.

SHALU: Yes.

HALEEMA: It sounds like that is something that the country is quite used to, but why was it so important for the Ministry of External Affairs to tell its citizens living over 2000 miles away from Russia, that you need to stay away from job offers from this country?

SHALU: Well, you're absolutely right, Haleema. You know, there's a lot of foreign remittance that comes into the countries in South Asian countries, by way of jobs that Indians get abroad, for instance, in Dubai. But why the government had to spring into action is because of the far away war on the Russia-Ukraine border, because it had pulled dozens of Indians into its fold without them even realizing what they were getting into, which is a hardcore war.

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SHALU: The travel agents who lure them, arrange a tourist or a student visa for them, for which they charge a huge sum of about $4,000, Haleema. So they're not breaking the law because the Russian army has been inducting foreign manpower to increase its strength in the war against Ukraine, and it doesn't care if those coming in to join are on a tourist visa or on a student visa. Now, in one of the YouTube videos I watched by a travel agent, I heard him luring job seekers by telling them that a Russian passport will open the gateway to Europe, where they can go after one year of completing their contract with the Russian army. I spoke to a 31 year old, young man named Sarfaraz, who is from the city of Kolkata in India.

*SARFARAZ: I am basically from a very normal family, Ma’am. In my family, there is my father, mother, two brothers and my sister. My brothers and I work and support the family.*

SHALU: And he shared with me the details of how he was conned.

*SARFARAZ: In August my father started having pain in his foot and the doctor said we might need to amputate it. And I got really scared. Whatever money I had I spent on my father. I didn’t have any work, and I was really stressed. My savings were almost done. And in the middle of all of that, I got this video which said that there’s work available — you’ll get three months of training to be a security helper.*

SHALU: The way the travel agents put it in their videos to which they lure these men into these job. They describe that this job is going to involve maybe, you know, job of a security guard, maybe manning the gates. You know, or sort of like cleaning the gun supplies when they come or loading the trucks or unloading them and so on.

*SARFARAZ: I thought once I get to Russia, I’ll work and maybe my future will be better. That’s why I went to Russia.*

SHALU: In fact, he asked his mother to spare all her savings and loan the money from his brother to pay the travel agent a fee of about $4,000. He was then clubbed with other men from different parts of the country who were flown to Moscow via Bahrain, and some of these men were flown via Dubai. In fact, these agents also duped Indians and Nepalis who were already working in Dubai into this job trap in Russia.

SCORING OUT

HALEEMA: So it sounds like these agents are very aware of this large migrant worker community and are basically recruiting from various hotspots where people are in need of a paycheck and are willing to travel for one.

SHALU: Exactly.

HALEEMA: What does training for these men end up looking like?

SHALU: So this training is almost like a crash course to be a soldier, Haleema. These men are trained for 15 days to be a fighter. The training involves handling guns, grenades and digging trenches. And after the training, they are taken in dozens to different parts of the frontline, where many have died over the last six months. Injured soldiers who return alive from the frontlines, some of them, they return with lost limbs and with grievous injuries. They are quickly replaced by the next batch of these trained soldiers.

HALEEMA: What did your source Sarfaraz tell you about his experience in training? Did he go through it?

SHALU: He told me that when he landed, along with other men in Moscow, they were taken to a military facility where they were asked to sign contracts that were in Russian language, which they clearly didn't understand. The agents assured them that there's nothing to worry about, and they should just go ahead and sign it. But to his shock, when he was sent to the military camp in Ryazan city in Russia, He discovered that the job of a helper actually does not exist and he, along with other men from different countries, would be trained for 15 days to go ahead and fight the war on behalf of Russia.

*SARFARAZ: Then they asked us, did you sign a contract? We said yes. They said the contract you signed…there’s a group here called Wagner. You’re now members of that. And for one year, you will go fight for us on the Ukraine border.*

SHALU: He actually didn't have words to describe his shock. He said that information just sent chills down his spine, and he immediately got in touch with another guy who was with him when he left from India, he was a part of the same group that was sent by the agent to Moscow. This guy's name was Hemil. And they had quickly become friends, you know, in this, in the short period that they had spent together in India before they left for Moscow.

*SARFARAZ: I met him for the first time and he was so friendly. He was a really good guy.*

SHALU: Now, Hemil had been sent forward into the next camp where he was trained as a fighter. And Hemil got in touch with Sarfaraz and told him the reality of what had actually happened.

*SARFARAZ: He said ‘if you come here, Sarfaraz, they will send you to the front. They’re taking us 2000 kilometers directly into Ukraine, to the front zone. I’m already here.’ And he said, ‘I’m really scared, Sarfaraz. I can’t do anything, but you can still get out because you’re still in the city.’*

HALEEMA: And how does Sarfaraz end up making his escape?

SHALU: So Sarfaraz, you know, he spent the first few couple of days after having been…after having realized that, you know, he's been scammed. He spent the first few days in, you know, establishing friendships with the Russian commanders using Google Translate app. And, in some time, he had sort of gained their confidence enough to be able to have permission to move out of the camp to buy some snacks or, you know, get some drinks for the group.

*SARFARAZ: When I got out of the camp I went straight to the Indian embassy in Moscow.*

SHALU: But to his surprise, the, Indian Embassy told him that, you know, it's going to take them a while to get him out using the official sort of diplomatic channels. As the Indian Embassy was trying to figure out the details of how to get its citizen out of, of Russia, Sarfaraz decided that he's not going to go back to the Russian army. And so he decided to live in hiding in Moscow. And he described it as one of the toughest periods of his life. It was about three weeks, that he spent, where he went hungry for days. And so he had a very tough time until he came across another Indian guy by the name of Raja Pathan, who had joined the Russian army a year ago. And he had managed to put in his papers. And so he helped him to get the money to apply for a white passport at the at the embassy, which in turn, you know, got him a return visa to come back to India. And so he said that, you know, he wanted to return desperately to India to be able to help his best friend, Hemil, in that group.

*SARFARAZ: Hemil, he used to say over and over again. Sarfaraz, my brother, please help me. Get us out of here. If it takes money, I’ll get the money.*

SHALU: But when he came back to India as soon as he landed, was so sad that he got a call from, you know, one of the guys in Hemil’s group who was sent to the front line that he had died in a drone strike.

*SARFARAZ: [IN ENGLISH] It’s too late for that.*

HALEEMA: Shalu, let's talk numbers. How many South Asians at this point have actually joined the Russian military? And do we have a sense of how many people are or are not making it back home?

SHALU: Well, I can speak for Nepal and India because I've been in touch with, Indian and, Nepalese men who have been stuck in Russia over the last three months. Nepal's government puts the figure of Nepali men in Russia to 400. But the Nepali fighters I have interviewed over the last three months believe that the number is easily over a thousand.But as far as Indians are concerned, the government says 35 Indians were duped into joining the war. But that number again, could be a lot higher, is what I've been told by my sources in Russia.

HALEEMA: And of these potentially thousands of men, do we know how many are actually making it back home?

SHALU: Not many, I'm afraid, Haleema. unless you managed to escape the first army camp in Ryazan. Sarfaraz was lucky to escape the camp. But not all of them, you know, have had the luck to be able to do that. Now, obviously, the Indian government has woken up to the crisis over the last few days. And Nepal's government has been talking about it for months. But we haven't seen any news of Nepalese men returning home, actually.

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SHALU: Families of those missing or who are in Russia pleading to come back have been asking questions of the government, but they haven't got any answers. In fact, recently, a group of Nepalese men shared a video with me where they're appealing to the Indian government to rescue them as their pleas to the Nepalese government have gone in vain. And they go on to say that because Indian, you know, government has a lot of clout, abroad and its friendship with Russia is, you know, has been good historically. And so they are asking for Indian government to collectively sort of help them to get the Indians and Nepali men out of there.

HALEEMA: Coming up, on Today, Explained…a defense expert tells us why men like Sarfaraz are part of a bigger trend and a global “market for might.”

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

HALEEMA: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Haleema Shah filling in as host today.

SEAN MCFATE (PROFESSOR, NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY): I started to track mercenaries about 20 years ago because I was one.

HALEEMA: And this is Dr. Sean McFate, a professor at the National Defense University.

SEAN: Or, as we'd say in the industry, a private military contractor, which is a euphemism. I was originally a U.S. Army paratrooper. I did that for about eight years. I got out and then I hopped to the dark side, as some would say, and I worked initially on U.S. government contracts in Africa, doing things traditionally given to the CIA or special operations forces. And then I expanded. I was a free agent, if you will. Working for oil companies and other things.

HALEEMA: Hm.

SEAN: Then I got out because I was not meeting older people in my industry.

HALEEMA: Oh, wow. That was the reason.

SEAN: <chuckles> I had to rethink some of my life choices. And also because I had seen some rather disturbing things about the privatization of warfare. And I wanted to think about the implications deeply.

HALEEMA: Well, I'm glad we're talking to you, Sean, because we just spent the first half of our show talking about Nepali and Indian men who are going to Russia for what they think is a security job, only to find out once they get there that they're being sent to a 15 to 20 day training camp to allegedly become members of the Wagner Group. How would you classify these men? Are they technically mercenaries? Are they members of the Dark Side?

SEAN: These men are victims of human trafficking in the market for might. And the world of mercenaries, think of it like a pyramid. At the very top, you call it like Tier one, they're like special operations forces, guys like, you know, Seals and Green Berets and Spetsnaz. And then lower you have the tier two, which are pretty effective offensive. Tier three is what most private military contractors are. They defend this oil line, defend the something. And then Tier four is sort of like not even mercenaries and more like conscripts into the mercenary world. They're either trafficked like these Indian and Nepalese men were tricked into it, or they were sort of dumped out of jail, which is what Prigozhin did. But these are purely cannon fodder.

HALEEMA: Hmm.

SEAN: I mean, these are sort of unskilled fighters, and the world would view them as mercenaries, even though that they are being trafficked and victims. But it’s in a netherworld of mercenaries if you can figure such a thing.

HALEEMA: Hmm. We've covered the Wagner Group in depth on this show, and we know that the Russian government is no stranger to working with hired guns. But I wonder if this particular strategy, of, as you say, trafficking young, untrained fighters is something new.

SEAN: It's not new to, you know, gangpress people into mercenary outfits. That is as old as mercenary warfare, which is called the second oldest profession. What it shows you about Russia today is that they are desperate. They have chewed through the resources of the Wagner group. Then they emptied out jails for the Wagner Group. They chewed through those resources. They have no more jails to empty out for this reason. And now they're starting to abduct essentially foreigners to fill the battlefield in Ukraine. So what it shows you is that Russia is run out of private military fighters. And they're doing schemes like in India and Nepal to to put troops on the battlefield in Ukraine.

HALEEMA: I'm wondering if you can talk about the real life concerns that come up when we talk about an increasing reliance on mercenaries.

SEAN: Russia has been turning to mercenaries because mercenaries are a way of disguising the costs of war to a population. Russians hate seeing Russian soldiers come home in body bags, but they don't care about dead contractors. Whether they're Russian or they're Indian or whatever.

HALEEMA: Hm.

SEAN: So Putin likes to use mercenaries, so he doesn't have big peace protests in the streets of Moscow or Saint Petersburg. So mercenaries disguise the costs of war, but they can also turn against you, as Putin himself learned last summer when the Wagner group marched on Moscow.

HALEEMA: Hm.

SEAN: Right? And Putin sent attack helicopters and aircraft out at them, and the troops shot them down. So when you create a world of mercenaries, you always have problems of control, safety and accountability. And that also a world awash in mercenaries, mercenaries we know from history are incentivized to start wars and elongate wars for profit. So a world with more mercenaries in it is a world with more warfare and human suffering.

HALEEMA: We're talking about Putin and Russia specifically, and the ability to disguise the cost of war — when you are relying on contractors, especially foreign contractors, because nobody wants to see one of their citizen soldiers come back in a body bag. That sounds like something that would be a reality everywhere. So are we seeing other countries play the same game that Putin is?

SEAN: Yes. The United States of America played this game during the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. Initially, like Putin, they thought those wars would be very quick—a few days, a few weeks. And when they protracted, they couldn't get enough Americans to volunteer for the US Armed Forces. And so they turned to contractors increasingly over the years. And a lot of those contractors came from other countries. So when I was in this industry, I worked alongside people from every single continent. Except for Antarctica. Including South Asia.

HALEEMA: Hm.

SEAN: When those contracts ended, a lot of them went home and they started their own mercenary companies or look for more work. And we've seen them appear in places like Africa, and the Middle East. We've seen the UAE and the Gulf States hire them to prosecute the war in Yemen. We've seen them on both sides of the war in Libya. We've seen them throughout sub-Saharan Africa. You know, you see them in conflict markets. So any place where there is things like natural resources to extract or a war to fight. And you have wealthy clients and unconstrained political rivalries, very weak rule of law, you will see mercenaries start to gather there. But we're seeing, every year, an increase of mercenaries globally.

HALEEMA: Wow.

SEAN: And this is the problem, because if this trend continues into the next decade or two, we could have wars without states. You know, one oil company fighting another, oil companies rented force. You know, billionaires like Elon Musk having his own space force. I mean, what does it mean when states no longer have the monopoly of force?

HALEEMA: Sean, you're painting a very complicated picture here. At times, it sounds like a world with more mercenaries is doomed for longer, more violent wars. And then at others, it sounds like a world with more mercenaries, is just a return to a world order that existed maybe long before the Citizen Army did. But at the end of the day, I think everyone's concern is kind of the same—that how do we make war less violent and less frequent? And I want to put that question to you. How do we make war less violent and less frequent in light of these trends?

SEAN: Well, it's a great question. And I would say this is that mercenaries, they're like fire. They can either burn your house down, but if you use them, well, they can power a steam engine.

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SEAN: We can also use mercenaries to stop genocides. To stop, you know, terrorist groups. And to stop brutal invasions like Russia invading Ukraine. And most mercenaries I talked to, except for the psychopaths, would rather work on the side of angels than devils. The second is that we can't forget that, yes, we are returning to a world order that's a lot more ancient and now forgotten. A world before citizen armies where, you know, force was something you could rent from a marketplace. And everybody did it. It was fairly normalized.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: So we're going to see a world, I think, of world order that, we're not, where nation states don't rule everything others can rule to, and some may be good and some may be bad. But it's going to be a lot more sticky world. The world not going to implode. But this idea that states can responsibly govern the world as a whole also... I think that myth needs to be challenged a bit as well.

SCORING BUMP

HALEEMA: Sean McFate. Writer. Veteran. Ex-mercenary.

SCORING BUMP

HALEEMA: Today’s episode was produced by Hady Mawajdeh, edited by Matt Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, engineered by Rob Byers…and guest hosted by me, Haleema Shah. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**