
World/ Exclusive

Six Indian men fighting for Russia set to return home



Families have confirmed that the men have been released from duty and are in Moscow awaiting paperwork (Photos supplied)

SHWETA SHARMA

A father who has never met his newborn son is among six Indian nationals set to be released from serving in the Russian army, nervously awaiting their clearance to fly home after being sent back from the front line of Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine.

The families of the men confirmed to *The Independent* that they have been released from duty and are now waiting for the completion of their paperwork in Moscow before they can board

flights back to India, in a process that is being coordinated by the Indian government.

In total, almost 100 Indian men, some as young as 22, have ended up on the front lines in Ukraine. *The Independent* previously reported how many feel they were tricked into serving with the Russian military after being promised safe, secure jobs in Russia and other countries.

The identities of the men being released from duty are Azad Yousuf Kumar, Mohammad Sufiyan, Sameer Ahmad, Abdul Nayeem, Kamal Singh and Syed Ilyas Hussain, *The Independent* has learnt.

Mr Kumar, who is from the Indian federal territory of Jammu and Kashmir, told *The Independent* that they are currently lodging in a hotel in Moscow and waiting for their final documents before they board their flight to Delhi. “We all are extremely happy. The nightmare that we have endured here will only end once we board the flight to India and land at the airport,” he said over the phone from Moscow.

Mr Kumar said he dug trenches for the Russian army after being lured into the country on 14 December. He alleges that he was duped by a YouTuber who promised him a job in Dubai. His brother Sajjad Ahmad said Mr Kumar would finally meet his son, who was born after his deployment with the Russian army, for the first time. “They have escaped death,” he said.



The men who have been released pose for a picture with Raja Pathan, a YouTuber who assisted them

At least 91 Indian nationals have ended up serving Russia on the front line, and of those, eight have died so far, according to India's foreign ministry.

The Indian government has come under sustained pressure to secure their release after their families spoke out about their plight, and the issue was raised by prime minister Narendra Modi during a visit to Moscow in July. Mr Modi's government only confirmed the recruitment of Indian citizens in Russia after media reports highlighted the grim conditions in which they were working.

The family of Sameer Ahmad, a resident of Karnataka, confirmed the release of the 23-year-old, who was conscripted after he landed in Russia on 15 December. Mohammad Mustafa, his brother, said Mr Ahmad would be home soon after a long struggle.

"We are elated, but at the same time sad about the Indian brothers who have already died there. This day has come after almost eight months of struggle that involved filing for appeals with the government, coordination, and additional financial expenses," Mr Mustafa said.

Mohammad Sufiyan, 22, who has been stuck in Russia for the last nine months, also confirmed his release to *The Independent*. His brother, Salman Zahoor Sayyed, said his family are relieved but will celebrate only when he returns to India. "It is a sigh of relief. We had lost hope for his return after the challenges we faced, but we are extremely happy now and just waiting for his return," he said.

Mr Sayyed said they have spent around Rs200,000 (£1,826) during their efforts to get him released, taking flights to Delhi and to Hyderabad to request an intervention from the government.

Mr Sayyed first raised the matter with the MP Asaduddin Owaisi after the issue of Indians' conscription in the Russian army came to light. "The government helped but it was too late," he said. "It is because of the media and Owaisi that our brothers are returning." He said that Raja Pathan, a YouTuber from Punjab

who is living in Russia and briefly served in the army himself, assisted them in securing the release and became their point of contact.

The Independent understands that more people will be released in the coming days.



Tejpal Singh from Punjab is among eight people who have already died in Russia

Russia promised an early release of all Indian citizens fighting in its army following prime minister Modi's visit to Moscow. Mr Modi "strongly raised the issue of early discharge" with Mr Putin, the Indian foreign ministry has said.

Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar told parliament in August that 91 Indians had been recruited to the Russian army and eight of them had died. He said others were seeking early discharge.

Among those killed was Tejpal Singh from Punjab, whose family told *The Independent* they had spent months trying to secure the return of his remains. Hemil Ashvinbhai Mangukiya, from Gujarat, and Mohammad Asfan, Ravi Moun, Harshal Anantrao Desale, Jishan Ashpak Pinjari, Jia Firoj Pinjari and Malik Gulamgous Mohammad Yakub have been identified as the others who have died.

Earlier this week, Vikramjit Sahney, another MP, confirmed that Russia is repatriating 15 Indian nationals and said that the contract for the remaining 69 is being invalidated, according to

The Times of India. The government is yet to confirm the release of the Indian nationals.

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