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Members of the Crimean Tatar community warn that they are being recruited to the Russian army in disproportionate numbers as part of what they view as an ongoing campaign to destroy the peninsula's indigenous population.

On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a partial military mobilisation which included residents of illegally annexed Crimea. Within hours, social media networks were alive with discussion on how Crimean Tatars – a Turkic ethnic group staunchly opposed to Russia's 2014 occupation of the peninsula – were being called up in huge numbers.

The Crimean Tatar Majlis, the group's representative body, said in a statement that "data analysis of the Crimean residents' mobilisation for just one day – September 22, 2022 - received by the majlis of the Crimean Tatar people, indicates that in the lists of mobilised citizens of different nationalities, the Crimean Tatars significantly exceed their proportional representation in Crimea's population.

"In some towns and regions, the number of Crimean Tatars being mobilized is up to 80-90 per cent of the number of persons included in the lists".

"This is a deliberate Russian attempt to destroy the Crimean Tatar people," Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky said in a video message on September 23.

Crimean Tatar men of military service age immediately began to flee. Community activists created a Telegram messenger group for those planning to leave and within two days had recruited 16,000 participants - about five per cent of the number of Crimean Tatars living in Ukraine.

The community has experienced large-scale waves of emigration from Crimea ever since its first annexation by the Russian Empire in 1783. In 1944, Russian leader Joseph Stalin ordered the entire community to be deported. They only began to return in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Community leaders have also been targeted since the 2014 Russian occupation, with many of those arrested have been recognised as political prisoners.

After the 2014 annexation, Russia banned the Tatar majlis, a move the International Court of Justice ordered it to overturn, and prevented its head Refat Chubarov from entering the peninsula. Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev was also denied entry to Crimea in the spring of 2014. Dzhemilev, a long time campaigner for Crimean Tatars deported on Stalin's orders in 1944 to be allowed to return to their homeland, had spent 15 years in Soviet prisons.

Arrests and detentions continue. In early September, 52-year-old chef Yashar Shykhmetov was sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges of belonging to Hizb ut-Tahrir, an Islamic organisation banned in Russia. Dozens of Crimean Tatars have been detained on similar charges.

"My people will return to Crimea after its liberation."

Most recently, on September 21, Nariman Dzhelyal, the first deputy head of the majlis, was sentenced to 17 years in prison for supposed sabotage. Dzhelyal, a journalist and teacher, had attended the founding summit of the Crimean Platform on August 23, 2021, an international diplomatic initiative launched by Ukraine to liberate Crimea.

He was arrested 12 days after his return to the peninsula together with two other Crimean Tatars, brothers Aziz Akhtemov, a 25-year-old car mechanic, and Asan Akhtemov, a 32-year-old journalist. All three were accused of sabotage, smuggling and possession of explosives. Russian police claimed they had been involved in an attack on a gas pipeline in Perevalny, a village between Simferopol and Alushta where the Russian coast guard is stationed.

In court, Dzhelyal said he had been questioned about why he had attended the Crimean platform.

"I at once understood why I am compelled to sit handcuffed with a bag on my head surrounded by the staff of the FSB [Russian security services] which forced me to admit participation in blowing up of the gas pipeline," he said.

Community leaders, most of whom now live in exile, say that this latest case was an example of a concerted campaign against their people.

"This is a message to the Crimean Tatars that no matter how public you are, no matter how much you are supported by international organisations, everyone's fate is the same," majlis member Eskender Bariiev told IWPR. "They have shown their intention to take further action against the indigenous Crimean Tatar people, and they have given a serious message that nothing will stop them."

Crimean Tatar historian Gulnara Abdula said that the forced monilisation was just the latest in a long sequence of repressions unleashed by Russia against the community.

"For 150 years, Crimean Tatars have left Crimea because of aggression and terror from the Russian empire," she told IWPR, adding that those fleeing now would not accept a long-term future elsewhere. "The world has changed, and people's minds have changed. I understand that my people will not settle in any [other] countries, they will return to Crimea after its liberation – just as they returned to their homeland after deportation in 1944."

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