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Georgia Calls Circassian Killings Genocide

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TBILISI — Georgia's parliament has branded the 19th-century killings of the Muslim Circassian minority by Russia's tsarist forces as genocide in a resolution likely to further strain Tbilisi's ties with Moscow.

Originally from the northwest Caucasus, Circassians say 1.5 million of their ancestors were systematically killed in a 1860-64 military campaign to conquer the Caucasus Mountain area on the southern border of today's Russia.

The deaths were recorded by Russian imperial historians in 1864. No nation has recognized them as genocide.

"We as representatives of the Georgian people should end the 150-year sufferings of the Circassians and restore their rights," said Nugzar Tsiklauri, head of a parliamentary committee for relations with diasporas and Caucasus nations.

The resolution is likely to strain relations between Russia and Georgia and could increase

tensions over the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, a city in what the Circassians consider their historic homeland.

Members of the Circassian diaspora are demanding that the Sochi Games be canceled or moved unless Russia apologizes for what they say was genocide against their ancestors. Some Circassian leaders are demanding autonomous territory within Russia.

Earlier this year President Dmitry Medvedev pointed to Georgia as a potential security threat to the games.

Tsiklauri presented a draft of the resolution, which said: "Killings and deportations of Circassians during the Russia-Caucasus War should be recognized as genocide and ethnic cleansing."

Deportations and turmoil led many Circassians south to Turkey and elsewhere, and their 7 million descendants are spread across the world from the United States to Jordan to Israel. About 700,000 remain in the northwest Caucasus.

The closest the Russian government has come to apologizing for the bloodshed was in 1994, when President Boris Yeltsin acknowledged that resistance to tsarist violence was legitimate.

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