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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Chechens Offer Weary Welcome

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Days before Crimea voted in a referendum to join Russia from Ukraine, Adam, a Chechen soldier, was ordered to go to the Black Sea peninsula to defend Russia's interests.

He and about 200 other soldiers from his special battalion, grouping ethnic Chechens, were mobilized on March 12 and spent two weeks in the Crimean city of Yevpatoria.

The mission, which mainly involved guarding buildings, was an illustration of how far the Chechnya region in Russia's North Caucasus is ready to go to show allegiance to Russian President Vladimir Putin, 14 years after he crushed its separatist drive. But many Chechens feel no love for Russia and have a sardonic message for their new Crimean compatriots: welcome to Russia, we hope you like it.

"The referendum itself was one thing. It was calm, orderly. But what happens now with Crimea, that is up to Vladimir Putin," Adam, 36, said in a cafe in Chechnya's main city of Grozny, speaking on condition that his last name was not used.

Chechnya fought a separatist war from 1994 to 1996 that briefly shook off Russian rule but lost a second war from 1999 to 2000 in which Putin re-established control over the region

and then installed militant-turned-loyalist Akhmet Kadyrov as its leader. Russia has poured money into Chechnya since then, as it plans to do in Crimea now. A cluster of steel skyscrapers built with Russian cash tower over Grozny, with boutiques offering Swiss watches and Italian suits.

The regional authorities portray this as a symbol of Chechnya's return to prosperity under Akhmet's son Ramzan, the region's leader since 2007.

But providing relative stability has involved crushing dissent, many people remain in poverty and human rights groups say there is a culture of fear in which security forces act with impunity to try to wipe out any remaining traces of separatism.

Kadyrov's spokesman Alvi Karimov declined to comment about Chechnya sending troops abroad to Crimea and said there were no human rights abuses in Chechnya.

"There are no human rights abuses in the republic of Chechnya. We assure everyone freedom of speech and freedom of conscience," he said. He has previously said allegations of abuse were an attempt to blacken Kadyrov's name.

Crimea, which has a narrow ethnic Russian majority, will by no means have all of the same problems as Chechnya. But it may still have much to learn from Chechnya's experience, said Kheda Saratova, who sits on Chechnya's state human rights council.

"Russia is used to forcing everyone around it into submission and the worst thing is that they force us all to act as though we are happy citizens of Russia," Saratova said.

"Russians are used to doing whatever they want to small nations like ours, but it's not just the Chechens. Crimeans will see the same thing." Last Sunday, thousands of people streamed to a Grozny soccer stadium to mark the 11th anniversary of a referendum on a new constitution that subordinated Chechnya to Moscow.

Participants, many of whom said they were forced to attend, held banners and flags supporting Crimea's entry into Russia which they said they were given by the rally organizers.

At the gates of the stadium, elderly women gathered begging to be let out but were pushed back by police barking in Chechen that they had to stay until the rally was over.

"We are here to support Crimea's entry into the Russian Federation. I think that before too long they can expect the same holidays. I am sure they will be as happy as we are, please send them our regards," Malika, 52, a mathematics teacher said with a sarcastic smirk.

Analysts say Kadyrov's exaggerated displays of support for Putin — including a Soviet-style 99.5 percent backing for Putin's party in a 2011 parliamentary election — belie the Chechen leader's fear of separatism, a force which many Chechens say could rise again, especially if Putin were out of power.

"Kadyrov and those around him have much to be grateful to Putin for, because they know they exist thanks only to stability under his authority," said Varvara Parkhomenko, an analyst at the International Crisis Group in Moscow.

Chechnya, which has a population of more than 1.2 million, is already fighting an insurgency against militants who wage violence across the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus with the aim of turning the region into an Islamic state.

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