

Crimean Tatars Kicked Out of Their Office

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Russian security forces blocking the way for Crimean Tatars crossing a checkpoint between Crimea and Kherson.

The main self-governing body of the Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority in the annexed Crimean peninsula, has been expelled from its office, Ukrainian media reported Tuesday.

The Mejlis — an informal executive body representing the interests of the peninsula's Tatars — and an affiliated charity left their offices in the annexed region's capital Simferopol, the charity's director Risa Shevkiyev said.

"We've vacated all premises in Simferopol, expelled the tenants and fired the workers," Shevkiyev said, Ukranews.ua reported.

"All of our property and assets have been frozen [based on a court order]," Shevkiyev added.

The Mejlis came under attack by authorities because its founder, outspoken Kremlin critic Mustafa Dzhemilev, holds foreign — Ukrainian — citizenship, the Russian Foreign Ministry

said Wednesday.

Police also searched the houses of Tatar leaders last week, reportedly seizing "extremist literature" and firearms in the process.

Ukrainian media also claimed they seized the personal belongings of Dzhemilev, who was previously expelled from Russia — and thus Crimea, as it was annexed by Moscow in March.

The Tatars were the main force of opposition to the annexation referendum, which was held in Crimea after Russia seized the region from Ukraine by force.

The Russian government unsuccessfully tried to placate the nation, once the region's dominant ethnic group, which now amounts to some 10 percent of Crimea's population.

Leaders of the Tatars, who have been deported to Central Asia in Stalin's times, claim to have faced repression following the referendum.

Russian diplomat Gennady Gatilov denied all such allegations at the UN-organized World Conference on Indigenous People in New York on Wednesday.

Moscow has done more for the Tatars than official Kiev did in the two decades of Ukrainian independence, Gatilov said, RIA Novosti reported.

His speech came amid claims from numerous Russian indigenous rights activists that government officials and unidentified thugs harassed them in an attempt to prevent them from attending the conference in New York.

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