

Crimean Leader Says Disappeared Tatars May Have Gone to Fight in Syria

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Crimean leader Sergei Aksyonov walking to his car after the news conference in central Moscow on Thursday.

Crimean leader Sergei Aksyonov acknowledged Thursday that several Crimean Tatars had disappeared since Russia annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in March, and seemed to shrug off concerns of foul play.

Human rights activists have warned that the men may have been kidnapped and that the disappearances are part of a repression campaign against the peninsula's Tatar population, who largely opposed the annexation.

Aksyonov cautioned against jumping to any conclusions about kidnappings, saying at a news conference in Moscow on Thursday that "in some cases these [disappeared] people were people who had been fighting in Syria," TASS news agency reported.

He did not elaborate on which individuals he was referring to, but said investigators were looking into the circumstances of each disappearance.

"I visited the parents of those guys who have disappeared. I can say that this is not a mass phenomenon. There are also cases of people of Slavic appearance disappearing. From the Crimean Tatar population, a total of four people have disappeared without a trace," Aksyonov said.

Aksyonov made the comments two days after President Vladimir Putin said he was unaware of any disappearances in Crimea.

"This is the first time I'm hearing that there have been disappearances of people there," Putin said at a meeting with human rights activists Tuesday, promising to look into the matter.

In early October, the Investigative Committee in Crimea opened a criminal case into the disappearance of two Crimean Tatars who went missing at the end of September. Radio Liberty cited witnesses as saying that the men, Islam Dzhepparov and Islam Dzhevdet, were snatched off the street and forced into a car by unknown men.

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