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Report Warns of Human Rights Infringements in Crimea

By Allison Quinn

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A woman shouts slogans during a demonstration on National Unity Day in Moscow Nov. 4.

Human Rights Watch has slammed authorities in Crimea, annexed by Russia from Ukraine in March, for what the group describes as serious human rights abuses against Crimean Tatars and residents who openly opposed the peninsula's annexation, which it calls Russia's "belligerent occupation."

On Monday, the organization published a 37-page report, titled "Rights in Retreat: Abuses in Crimea," based on 42 interviews with Crimean Tatars, activists, journalists, lawyers and others.

Treatment of the local Tatar community features predominantly in the report, which criticizes authorities for "invoking Russia's vaguely worded and overly broad anti-extremism legislation to issue multiple 'anti-extremist warnings' to the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatar representative body," according to a summary of the report on the group's website.

In addition, "invasive, and in some cases unwarranted," searches of mosques and Islamic schools have been carried out, along with searches in the homes of dozens of Crimean Tatars, the report said, and Crimean Tatar media outlets have been "harassed," along with pro-Ukrainian ones.

Ukrainians who do not wish to accept Russian citizenship have also been victims of discrimination and harassment, according to the report. They are prohibited from holding government or municipal jobs and were given only one month to decide whether to accept Russian citizenship, and those who chose to retain Ukrainian citizenship faced numerous difficulties and "are now treated as foreigners in their own home territory," the report said.

"Russia is not really offering people a choice of citizenship, but forcing civilians under its control to choose between taking Russian citizenship or facing discrimination and worse," Yulia Gorbunova, a Europe and Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, was cited as saying in the report's summary.

The organization refers to "Russia's occupation of Crimea" throughout the report, citing the definition of "occupation" from the 1949 Geneva Convention.

Russia's presence in Crimea, "in the face of Ukrainian opposition and objection, constitutes a belligerent occupation," the report reads, adding that despite the "broad international outcry" over the situation, "it hasn't been enough to stop abuses."

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March was condemned by the West and widely seen as a forceful occupation.

Although a referendum was held to purportedly let Crimean residents decide their fate for themselves, many observers complained that the vote was done hurriedly, without proper preparations, and at gunpoint, as Russian soldiers stood guard on the peninsula.

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