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Russia's Persecution of Crimean Tatars Intensifying, Says HRW

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Crimean Tatars / Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS

Russia is persecuting Crimean Tatars for opposing Moscow's three-year occupation of the Black Sea peninsula at an increasing rate, Human Rights Watch said in a new report Tuesday.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014, which met with economic sanctions from Western countries that refused to recognize Moscow's referendum on unification.

Crimean Tatars have largely opposed Russian rule and have seen its local self-governing body banned as an extremist organization.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a report on Tuesday that the Crimean Tatars' opposition to the annexation has led to their "relentless" persecution by Russia.

"[Russian authorities] have portrayed politically active Crimean Tatars as extremists and terrorists, forced many into exile, and ensured that those who choose to stay never feel safe to speak their mind," HRW Europe and Central Asia director Hugh Williamson said.

The rights group said at least 26 Crimean Tatars have been arrested on terror charges since 2015 with sentences ranging from 5 years to life in prison. Several members of the ethnic minority were subjected to ill-treatment, including torture, HRW said.

HRW said torture and violations of due process, privacy and fair trial amounted to "a policy of persecution against Crimean Tatars."

A recent UN report accused Russian state agents of grave abuses in Crimea, including the disappearance of up to 10 political opponents and the deaths of at least three detainees.

The report, published in September, said Moscow has illegally extended its laws into the peninsula and applied them arbitrarily against opponents of the annexation.

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