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2 Russians Win Right to Apply for Refugee Status in S. Korea

By AFP

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Seoul's Incheon International Airport **EPA / TASS**

A South Korean court on Tuesday granted two Russian asylum seekers who have been stranded at Incheon airport for months the right to apply for refugee status, allowing them to enter the country.

The Incheon District Court rejected one other Russian national's plea, without detailing the reasons for their decision.

The three men, whose lawyer requested they not be named out of concern for the safety of their families in Russia, have been living inside Incheon International Airport since October when they fled to avoid being drafted to fight in Ukraine.

They landed in South Korea with hopes of being granted asylum, but the country's Justice Ministry rejected their refugee applications at the airport.

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Seeking to avoid enlistment does not qualify as a valid reason for receiving refugee status in South Korea, where all able-bodied men must serve 18 months of compulsory military service.

The rejection prompted the three men to bring the case to court, while they remained stranded in transit areas at the airport for months.

"We welcome the court's decision on the two but it is regrettable that it rejected the other one's plea," said attorney Lee Jong-chan, who represents the three Russians.

"They came here trying to avoid killing innocent people and getting themselves killed in a war initiated by their home country. It took them four months just to win the right to apply for refugee status," he said.

The two will end their months-long airport stay and be settled in South Korea while undergoing the asylum recognition process, which could take years.

The third Russian has the right to appeal, but will have to remain at the airport in the interim.

There are two more Russians trapped at the airport who have also been denied the right to apply for asylum.

The court will rule on their cases later this month.

South Korea has signed international conventions on refugees but typically accepts just a handful of asylum seekers each year.

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