Bitter homecoming for exiled Tatars
By Helen Fawkes
BBC, Ukraine

Mustafa Jemilev retraces the steps taken by thousands of Crimean Tatars 60 years ago.

As a baby he was among more than 200,000 Tatars exiled from Ukraine to Central Asia on the orders of the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

In the shadow of a Soviet red star which still overlooks Simferopol train station, Mustafa Jemilev has returned to where the mass deportations were carried out on 18 May 1944.

Half of these people died during the journey.

But this is one of the crimes committed during the World War II which has largely been forgotten.

For decades, the Crimean Tatars were prevented from returning to Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula.

Mustafa spent years in jail in Uzbekistan fighting for the right to return, he is now the chairman of Mejlis, the unofficial parliament of Crimean Tatars.

Land confiscated

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union more than a 250,000 Tatars have now moved from Central Asia back to the Crimea.

But Mustafa admits that it has not been a triumphant home-coming.

"Crimean Tatars are still hardly able to afford a roof over their head, this country doesn't give back what they've taken away from us, and so there are lots of problem," he said.

Many now live in settlements with no water, no gas and no proper roads. Their original homes were confiscated by the Soviet authorities and given to Russians.

While about half of Crimean Tatars have been allocated land, many claim they have not been given the prime plots which they believe they have a right to.

It is on the picturesque southern coast of the Crimea that the problem is at its worst.

Hard life

This land is some of the most expensive and sought-after in Ukraine and to get a piece of it, a number of Crimean Tatars have resorted to desperate measures.
The Chulakova family have been homeless for 10 years.

Frustrated, they seized a plot of land near their former home and, like tens of thousands of people in the Crimea, they are squatters.

Twelve of them now share a cramped wooden shed they built themselves overlooking a bay near Yalta.

"This is a hard life and very unfair," says Mugube Chulakova who was deported as a child. "Our old house is not far away but we can not live there. It upsets me that we can't even live legally on this plot of land."

About an hour's drive away back in Simferopol; a Russian pensioner is locked out of her own home.

Protests

Maria Ivanova shakes the rusty chain which is looped around the garden fence and stares through the chain link fence.

She claims her house and small plot of land was illegally seized by a Crimean Tatar.

"We've been living here for a long time, it was peaceful until they returned, now bad things have started to happen, everybody is afraid," says Maria.

The relationship between Tatars who are Muslim and the local population of Ukrainians and ethnic Russians, who are mainly Orthodox, is not easy.

But, it is the issue of land which has polarised the two communities against each other.

Recently there has been increase in protests and violent clashes. There has been calls for calm ahead of the 60th anniversary and protests have been banned.

Tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars are expected on the streets of the Crimean capital Simferopol to mark the day of remembrance on Tuesday.

Mustafa says he hopes that people will remember the victims with the dignity they deserve.

"We do not want revenge and we appeal to people that there should be no bloodshed," he said. "There is satisfaction that at last we are back in our motherland. We want to continue to gain our rights by peaceful means."

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