Crimean Tatars fear for future
Ukraine's Muslim minority say anti-Tatar propaganda increasing under pro-Russian government.

Matthew Collin in Simferopol, Ukraine
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"I've already been here for 960 days, and today is the 961st," said the weather-beaten Tatar man, squinting beneath the powerful Crimean sun.

Seydamet Smailov has spent almost three years living alone in a dilapidated cabin by the side of a busy road in the Ukrainian city of Simferopol because he has a vital task to accomplish: standing guard over a pile of bricks.

For him, these are no ordinary bricks: one day, he hopes, they will form part of a grand new mosque which the Crimean Tatars plan to build on the site where he is now living.

"I didn't expect it would take so long, but because I was given this mission, I have to fulfill it," Smailov said.

"It's important for the Muslims of Crimea - and for my own children."

But the local authorities in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula have been blocking permission for construction of the showpiece mosque to begin - another example, Tatars complain, of the discrimination which they say they have to endure in their ancestral homeland.

Smailov said he was ready to wait for as long as it takes: "You have to be persistent and protect your own rights."

Tragic history

The Crimean Tatars have a tragic history: around 200,000 of them were forcibly deported en masse to Central Asia by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1944, after being falsely accused of collaborating with Nazi Germany.

They were finally allowed to return during the twilight years of the Soviet Union, and now make up around 12 per cent of Crimea's population - massively outnumbered by the ethnic Russians who dominate the peninsula.

The main problem for many Crimean Tatars is that they have not been able to reclaim the lands which their families possessed before the deportation. They accuse the authorities of doing little to help them reintegrate into Ukrainian society.

These feelings of resentment have provoked some of them to resort to radical measures, like Daniyal Ametov, the leader of a land-squatting movement which takes direct action to seize back what Tatars regard as their rightful territory.
"When we kept getting refused by the authorities, we had to organise ourselves because our ancestors' land was given away to Russians and our historical heritage was being lost," Ametov explained.

"It's an example of self-help which became a movement."

**Desperation and determination**

If their applications to build houses are refused, some Tatars seize plots of land, put up small stone huts to indicate possession, and then gradually construct larger homes on the self-appropriated sites.

Hundreds of the austere stone huts stand clustered together in scrubby fields on the outskirts of Simferopol. But these bleak little settlements are not just products of desperation; they are also symbols of the Tatars' determination to re-establish communities for themselves here.

The local authorities have repeatedly warned that seizing land is a crime which could increase ethnic tensions.

The head of the Crimean regional parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, recently urged Tatars not to " politicise" the land issue, so that the peninsula can "look to the future and not repeat the mistakes of the past".

Tatars are represented in the regional parliament, which according to the authorities demonstrates that they are not excluded from the political life of the region.

Konstantinov also insisted that his administration was doing what it could to help the Tatars resettle, despite financial limitations.

But one land squatter in Simferopol, Muhterem Emir-Usein, who built a house for his wife and children after he returned from exile, insisted that he had no other choice but to take direct action.

"For me, the phrase 'land squatting' is very annoying," he said.

"If the government doesn't take any steps to help us re-establish ourselves in our motherland, that forces us to take steps to create decent conditions for ourselves."

**Anti-Tatar propaganda**

Mustafa Jemilev is a hero to many Tatars. He was deported by Stalin as a child along with his family, and later spent years in jail as a dissident under the Soviet regime. He is now the leader of the Tatars' political body, the Mejlis.
Jemilev believes that since a pro-Russian government came to power in Ukraine earlier this year, anti-Tatar propaganda has intensified.

"Anything related to Crimean Tatars is exaggerated. Everyone is trying to depict us in a negative way," he said.

Crimea used to be part of Russia until the Soviet leadership gifted it to Ukraine in the 1950s.

Today, some pro-Moscow politicians in the region openly advocate the idea of reunification with Russia - an idea which many ethnic Russians in Crimea support, but Tatars find deeply worrying, because they see it as a potential threat.

Jemilev claims that Ukraine's new government has allowed secessionist sentiments to grow.

"Aggressive, bigoted pro-Russian groups have become the allies of the state, while the Crimean Tatars are opponents of both the authorities and these bigoted pro-Russian forces; that's why we are in a very difficult situation," he alleged.

**Empty promises**

The local authorities see it differently, pointing out that the Ukrainian president has declared that he wants to resolve the Tatars' problems.

"The new president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, has committed himself to taking this issue under his personal control," the head of the regional parliament has insisted.

But the Crimean Tatars have heard similar promises from politicians many times before, and more than 20 years after they began to return from exile, some have given up hope that the authorities will do anything substantial to help them.

As land-squatter Muhterem Emir-Usein put it: "We can't depend on anyone else but ourselves."