

Long Homecoming for Georgia's Meskhetians

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Government says it's speeding up processing of applications from ethnic minority members to come back to their old homeland.

A senior Georgian official says his government has accelerated the process by which Meskhetians, the descendants of a Turkish-speaking minority deported by Stalin, can acquire full rights to live in their old homeland.

Refugee and Resettlement Minister David Darakhvelidze says 8,900 applications for "repatriate status" have been filed, of which 5,841 have so far been approved to go to the review stage.

A total of 1,053 people have received repatriate status, which puts them on the fast track to acquiring citizenship and the rights that come with it, such as unfettered access to state education.

"They can now apply to the relevant authorities for Georgian citizenship," Darakhvelidze said. "The examination of applications was going slowly, but we have sped it up."

NGOs that assist the Meskhetians hope the minister's comments indicate that this government, which came to power after the October 2012 election, will simplify the repatriation process and provide financial assistance to returnees. Some Meskhetians already living in the country are so badly off that they are considering emigration, they say.

Under obligations undertaken when Georgia joined the Council of Europe in 1999 and subsequent national legislation, the government was supposed to have completed the process by the end of last year, but the refugees and resettlement ministry is still checking the applications.

Stalin's government deported around 100,000 Meskhetians from Georgia in 1944 as part of a wave of expulsions that also engulfed the Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Karachay and other minorities from the southern fringe of the Soviet Union. Unlike the others, however, the Meskhetians were never permitted to return home and remained in exile in Central Asia until the late 1980s, when they fled ethnic riots to find refuge in Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and elsewhere.

After pledging to facilitate their return in 1999, the Georgian government took no further action until 2007, when a law was passed setting out practical mechanisms. Many Meskhetians got tired of waiting and moved to Georgia under their own steam, which meant they missed out on the formal repatriation programme.

When the government stopped accepting new applications for repatriate status ended at the beginning of 2010, fewer than 6,000 of the estimated 300,000 Meskhetians around the world had expressing an interest in coming back.

Tsira Meskhishvili, head of Tolerant, an NGO that assists Meskhetians in Georgia, says the rest have missed their chance. She believes many were deterred by the complex bureaucracy involved.

"The majority of Meskhetians who wanted to return to their historical homeland didn't have any information about who was accepting their documents. Some saw the repatriation law as more of an obstacle than a means of allowing their return," she said. "The range of documents a would-be returnee has to submit is too extensive. It includes documents that applicants find very hard to obtain. Also, it requires notarised documents in Georgian or English to be submitted, which entails some expenditure."

Meskhishvili said it would take more than just a law to fulfil the Council of Europe obligations, which was what the last government seemed to believe. She would like the government to provide financial help and accommodation to the settlers.

Darakhvelidze said it would be very hard to find the money to commit to this, as the government had other, more urgent, priorities. He indicated that once they cleared the repatriation and citizenship procedures, the Meskhetians were on their own.

"The Meskhetians must be settled in various regions of Georgia where there are homes and land plots available. They can take these houses and then integrate or not – that's up to them," he said. "In the difficult economic circumstances we are in, we need to resolve the housing and employment problems of up to 60,000 refugee families. It would be hard to arrange the settlement of our Meskhetian compatriots in parallel, at the same time."

While Darakhvelidze suggested that his government had done more to hasten the Meskhetians' return than its predecessor, this was disputed by Giga Bokeria, a leader of the United National Movement that was in government until last October.

"Before the [2003] Rose Revolution, almost nothing was done about repatriation. The legal foundations were worked out in 2006, and the law passed in 2007. We... prepared the ground for the whole repatriation process," said Bokeria, who was among those who drafted the law.

Without assistance, naturalised Meskhetians are likely to find it hard to settle down and find employment.

Ali Mehriev has been in Georgia for the last 15 years, but is considering leaving.

His family is among around 2,000 already living in Georgia. They came back from the mid-1980s onwards, before there was any programme designed to help them.

"Our parents died dreaming of Georgia," Mehriev said. "If [more] people don't come soon, then I'll leave.... This is the 12th home I've lived in since arriving in Georgia. We lived all over the place," said Mehriev, who now lives in Abastumani, a village in the Meskhetians' home ground in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in southern Georgia.

"I wanted to return to my ancestral homeland and, after much suffering, I did come back, but it's very hard for us. We can't thrive or find any work," he said. "A little patch of land and a couple of cows isn't enough to support a family of seven. That's why we're thinking of leaving."

One of the challenges facing the Meskhetians is integrating with the local community as immigrants and as Muslims in this Christian-majority part of Georgia.

"I am a Muslim, a legacy from my forebears. That isn't my fault," Mehriev said.

Meskhishvili said the government needed to work with local communities as well as with the Meskhetians themselves.

A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in 2007, indicated that 67 per cent of respondents opposed Meskhetian repatriation, while only 16 per cent were in favour.

Ucha Bluashvili, an academic specialising in Meskhetian affairs, warned of social problems if the government did not address such attitudes.

"Since nothing has been done to educate the population in the last five years, it is clear the opinion of ordinary citizens won't have changed," he said.

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