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TAJIKISTAN: Government's Synagogue demolition ends Jewish worship, Protestant church next?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Tajikistan's bulldozing of the country's only synagogue - in the capital Dushanbe - has forced the Jewish community to halt worship and stop its food aid programme. "We do not have a place to hold our worship," Chief Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmov told Forum 18 News Service. "We also have no place to feed the elderly and the poor." Faced with the authorities' determination to destroy the synagogue, the community requested that they be allowed to dismantle the building themselves. Rabbi Abdurakhmov commented to Forum 18 that every part of the building is sacred, so "it would be an abomination for the Jewish religion to bulldoze the synagogue." However, "the Chief Engineer came to the site and showed his dissatisfaction with the speed of our work and had the remaining wall bulldozed." Yusuf Salimov of the Tajik Presidential Administration (which the community has tried to get compensation from) claimed to Forum 18 that he is not aware of the problem. "They should complain to the higher courts," he said. When Forum 18 told him that Jewish community leaders were already discouraged from doing so, thinking that the authorities were indifferent to their plight, he responded: "Let them write to us about it." The state's next demolition target, as part of a controversial city reconstruction plan, is the Nani-Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church. Church members told Forum 18 they have been given until early July to vacate the building ahead of demolition.

Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, Chief Rabbi of Tajikistan's long-standing Jewish community, has told Forum 18 News Service that the state's demolition of the Jewish community's only remaining synagogue - in the capital Dushanbe - has brought all its community activity to a halt. "We do not have a place to hold our worship," he told Forum 18 on 24 June from Dushanbe. "We also have no place to feed the elderly and the poor." He said the community has not held any worship since the end of May, and has had to stop its food programme for poor and elderly members of the community. Abdurakhmanov complained that the city authorities offered no financial compensation or another plot of land to build a new synagogue. "Even if they gave us another suitable place to build a synagogue we do not have any funds to do it."

The synagogue was destroyed as part of city reconstruction plans that also saw homes and businesses bulldozed. The Nani-Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church not far from the former synagogue is immediately threatened in the redevelopment. Church members told Forum 18 it has been given a deadline of early July to vacate the building ahead of demolition. They fear they will not be adequately compensated. Other religious communities in Dushanbe fear further reconstruction could also leave them without their place of worship and without adequate compensation.

Payam Foroughi, Human Dimension Officer of the Office in Tajikistan of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), says that the destruction of the synagogue involves both the rights of a religious minority to a place of worship and the property rights of the same community as residents of Dushanbe. "We are aware that the synagogue had served for decades as a house of worship for the Jewish community of Tajikistan," he told Forum 18 on 25 June from Dushanbe.

In recent years, the synagogue had also served as a community centre, from where many elderly believers were assisted with their daily needs, Foroughi pointed out. "It would thus be prudent for the City of Dushanbe to fully compensate not only the Jewish community for the loss of their house of worship, and to allow for a new synagogue to be constructed as soon as possible," he told Forum 18. "The City should also consider fully compensating all households who have been forcefully evicted from their premises as part of the City's so called 'general plan'."

When doing so, the City should take into account the market rate of property as part of the compensation package, Foroughi said. "The OSCE Office in Tajikistan will continue to monitor this and other cases of loss of property due to forceful evictions and hopes to see a mutually acceptable resolution in such cases."

The Jewish community was evicted from the synagogue in the centre of Dushanbe on 28 May and demolition by the city authorities continued until 24 June, Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18. For the city's several hundred Jews, the synagogue was both a place for religious services and a community centre. Many of the Jews are elderly and poor, and the synagogue was a place where they could also get a free meal, he stated.

At a session from 11 to 18 April, the Administrative Court of Dushanbe's Ismoilily Somoniy District considered the suit brought by the District Hukumat (Executive authority) and an agency of the City Administration to demolish the synagogue. In its 18 April ruling, the court backed the suit. The court also ruled that Dushanbe city's administration is not obliged to offer the community a plot of land for the construction of a new synagogue (see F18News 15 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1130>).

The synagogue was situated near the site where a new Presidential Palace is being built. The first demolition notice was handed out in 2003. In February 2006 the authorities began demolishing the synagogue. The mikvah (ritual bathhouse), classroom and kosher butchery were demolished before an outcry brought the destruction to a halt (see F18News 10 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032>).

Asked if they would consider appealing to the Regional and Supreme courts, Rabbi Abdurakhmanov said he did not see how this could help. "We even talked to people from the Presidential Administration asking them for compensation," he told Forum 18. "But they told us why should they help us when the court decision said everything clearly."

Yusuf Salimov, the Head of the Section at the Presidential Administration for Guaranteeing the Constitutional Rights of Citizens, claimed that he is not aware of the problem. "They should complain to the higher courts," he told Forum 18 on 25 June. Told that the community leaders were already discouraged from doing so, believing that the authorities were indifferent to their plight, he responded: "Let them write to us about it. We will do everything to help them."

Rabbi Abdurakhmanov reported that the community has only been involved with the technical details of the eviction. "The district court bailiffs brought a notification signed on 26 May saying that we should leave the building at the latest by 29 May," he told Forum 18. "But in fact the Chief Engineer of the City Architecture Department came to the site with the bulldozer and workers already on 28 May. They did not even give us enough time to pack up and leave decently."

The community requested that they be allowed to dismantle the building themselves, which they were allowed to. "You know it would be an abomination for the Jewish religion to bulldoze the synagogue since every part of the building including the frames, the ceiling, the walls, and many other items are sacred," Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18. "We have been carefully taking apart the building, and the bricks of the walls. But today the Chief Engineer came to the site and showed his dissatisfaction with the speed of our work and had the remaining wall bulldozed."

Lev Levaev, an Uzbek-born businessman who heads the World Congress of Bukharan Jews, held talks on 24 June with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon at which the fate of the synagogue was discussed. Tajik news agency Asia Plus reported Levaev as saying that his group may help fund a new synagogue, with a final decision on financing in September. In May 2004 Levaev had written to President Rahmon asking him to spare the synagogue from destruction.

Religious organisations - as well as other organisations and private individuals - have little security of property ownership in Tajikistan. Dushanbe city authorities demolished several mosques in September 2007 because they did not have approval from the Justice Ministry and "spoiled the architecture of the city" (see F18News 10 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1032>).

The Nani-Hayat Church in central Dushanbe has known it was under threat. The Mayor's office told church members in March they had until the end of May to move out (see F18News 15 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1130>).

Church members told Forum 18 on 25 June that the city authorities have given them two more weeks to move out. "Our lawyer right now is busy talking to the authorities and the City Architecture Department to get compensation," church members said. "But we are afraid that we will get very little or nothing in compensation for our church building."

The church member pointed out that the building is in central Dushanbe and easy for people to reach. It has five rooms and a hundred-square-metre yard. "We heard that the authorities may offer either a plot of land, which we believe will be a long distance away, or a sum of money which will not equal the current market value," church members reported.

Tajik authorities have been working on a new Religion Law, which many fear will restrict citizens' right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief (see F18News 27 November 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1052>). The Jehovah's Witnesses and two Protestant organisations - Ehyo Church and the Abundant Life Christian Centre - were all banned in late 2007, and are still banned (see F18News 22 May 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1132>). (END)

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31>>.

For more background see Forum 18's Tajikistan religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=190>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815>.

A printer-friendly map of Tajikistan is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=tajiki>>.

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