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TAJIKISTAN: Last days for country's only synagogue?

By Mushfig Bayram, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Tajikistan's only synagogue could be bulldozed in days, its Rabbi, Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, has told Forum 18 News Service. The synagogue has long been under threat, supposedly because of reconstruction in the capital Dushanbe, and in February 2006 the authorities began bulldozing it. A court has now ruled that the 350-strong Jewish community must leave their synagogue by Sunday 18 May, when demolition is threatened to resume. The court refused to accept evidence that the synagogue belongs to the Jewish community, and after the case officials told Rabbi Abdurakhmanov that the community could demolish the synagogue itself if it wanted to save the materials. Officials have repeatedly refused to discuss the case with Forum 18, including whether compensation will be given. The church of the Nani-Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church is also threatened, and although compensation has been offered officials refuse to say how much this will be. Several mosques were demolished in Dushanbe in 2007 because they did not have approval from the Justice Ministry, but no mosques have been demolished in the city in 2008.

The only synagogue in the Tajik capital Dushanbe – and the only synagogue in the whole of the country – could be days away from being bulldozed, Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 14 May. He said a court ruled in mid-April that the 350-strong community is to be evicted from the building no later than 18 May on which date the authorities would proceed to demolish the building. Officials told Rabbi Abdurakhmanov after the court case that the Jewish community could demolish the synagogue itself if it wanted to save the materials. Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 that the community has decided not to do this. Officials at the District and City Administrations refused to discuss with Forum 18 why the synagogue is to be demolished and whether the community will get any compensation.

The city authorities decided to demolish the synagogue as part of the realisation of the master plan of reconstruction of the capital. The synagogue, built by the local Jewish community a century ago, is 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).

At a session from 11 to 18 April, the Administrative Court of Dushanbe's Ismoiliy 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, Abdurakhmanov reported.

Although the community was given one month to appeal to a higher court, Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 that they were not planning to do so. "What difference will it make? Most of the authorities - including the city administration - are fully aware of the case," he said. "We have already complained to various authorities time and time again yet achieved no results."

When reaching its decision the court did not take into account documents presented by the community proving that the building belonged to it, Rabbi Abdurakhmanov complained. "The documents we have prove that the building was nationalised by the decision of the Soviet of People's Commissars in 1951." The decision further states that the Jewish community was then given the right to use the building free of charge, he added. "In 1980 the Tajikistan Soviet of Ministers thought it necessary to make a contract with the community giving the building to the community for it to use on that basis."

When the Jewish community earlier raised the issue with the State Property Committee to determine who owned the building, the Committee decided that the contract which was made between the Soviet of Ministers and the community had no legal basis, Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18. "But the court basically used that same contract as proof that the building belonged to the city administration."

Forum 18 tried to talk on 14 May to Bakhrom Kushakov of the Ismoili Somoniy District Hukumat (Executive authority), one of the two state plaintiffs in the case. As soon as Kushakov heard Forum 18's question on the synagogue he put down the phone. On subsequent calls to Kushakov's office, each time he heard that Forum 18 was calling he put down the phone.

Sanobar Rahimova, who oversees property issues at the City Mayor's office, refused to discuss the forthcoming demolition of the

synagogue with Forum 18 on 14 May. She referred all questions to the Mayor's spokesperson, Shaukat Saidov. However, Saidov's phone went unanswered on 14 and 15 May. Forum 18 called Rahimova again on 15 May, and she asked to call back later. Each time Forum 18 called back, she put down the phone.

Saidbek Mahmaddullov, the deputy head of the Religious Affairs Committee, claims that the Committee would be happy to help the Jewish community if the community asks it to do so. "We cannot on our own initiative take steps to resolve this property issue," Mahmaddullov insisted to Forum 18 on 14 May.

However, Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 that it was not true that the community had not asked the Committee to help them. "It was in fact Muradullo Davlatov, the head of the Committee, who pressed on with the case to force us to leave the building," he said.

Asked what the best they hoped for in the situation was, Abdurakhmanov said they expected the city authorities to provide them a new building in central Dushanbe not far from the current location of the synagogue since the community does not have funds to buy or build one. "Another solution would be that if the Chief Rabbi of Central Asia, Abe David Gurevich, could ask around and collect funds to build a new synagogue, we would expect a piece of land again not far from the current location," he said. However, Rabbi Abdurakhmanov reported that Chief Rabbi Gurevich has not been able to collect the necessary funds so far.

Currently no more than a thousand Jews live in the whole of Tajikistan, a small proportion of the number who lived in the country before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18. "At that time the number of so-called Bukharan Jews alone exceeded 12,000."

The redevelopment of the centre of Dushanbe also threatens the building of the Nani-Hayat (Bread of Life) Protestant Church. Protestants from Dushanbe told Forum 18 on 15 May that the Mayor's office told church members in March they had until the end of May to move out. "The authorities promised money in compensation," Protestants reported, "but they did not say how much they would offer for the building." The church is now worried that the money it is due to get from the Mayor's office will not be enough to buy a new building close to the current location, which is in walking distance for many members of the church.

Given the refusal by Rahimova and Saidov of the city Mayor's Office to talk to Forum 18, it has been impossible to find out why the Nani-Hayat church needs to be demolished and how much compensation the Mayor's Office is offering.

Dushanbe city authorities also 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). Hikmatullo Saifullozoda of the opposition Islamic Revival Party (IRP) told Forum 18 on 15 May that no mosques have been demolished in the city since then.

The Tajik authorities have been working on a new Religion Law which many fear will restrict religious rights further (see F18News 27 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1052). The Jehovah's Witnesses and two Protestant organisations were banned in late 2007 (see F18News 9 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1045). (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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