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TAJIKISTAN: Will Jews get compensation when synagogue is demolished?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

When Tajikistan's only synagogue is demolished next year in the capital Dushanbe as part of city reconstruction plans, the Jewish community – which built it a century ago - does not know if it will get compensation. "A general reconstruction of the city centre is being planned, and unfortunately our building turned out to be in that sector," Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 News Service. "However, the authorities could have held a meeting with the Jews and avoided demolishing the only synagogue in the whole of Tajikistan." Rabi Aliyev of the government's committee for religious affairs told Forum 18 he did not know either if compensation is planned.

The Jewish community in the capital Dushanbe has no idea whether it will get any compensation when its synagogue – the only one in Tajikistan - will be demolished next year as part of city reconstruction plans, Rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 News Service from Dushanbe on 26 August. "This has not been discussed." He stressed that he was not accusing the authorities of demolishing the synagogue deliberately. "A general reconstruction of the city centre is being planned, and unfortunately our building turned out to be in that sector," he declared. "However, the authorities could have held a meeting with the Jews and avoided demolishing the only synagogue in the whole of Tajikistan."

Rabi Aliyev, chief specialist at the government's committee for religious affairs in Dushanbe, was unable to tell Forum 18 what compensation would be offered if the synagogue is demolished.

The synagogue, built by the local Jewish community at the beginning of the twentieth century, was confiscated by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s. In 1958 the Jewish community was officially allowed to use the building again, but ownership was not transferred back to it and it remains state-owned property. The small synagogue was reported by the Rujen news agency on 18 August to be in a "lamentable condition", owing to the poverty of local Jews in the wake of economic collapse and the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s, during which most Jews abandoned the country.

Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 that the demolition of the synagogue is set to take place in 2004 under the terms of document no. 18, dated 23 January 2003, which was approved by a commission of the hakimiat (administration) of the city's Ismail Somoni district. The area where the synagogue is located is the future site for a Palace of Nations.

Rabbi Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 that only about 150 Jews remain in Dushanbe, with about 30 regular worshippers at the synagogue. He said the community does not have the money to build a new synagogue and that if the current synagogue was destroyed the Jews would have to look for a sponsor.

In the absence of the chairman of the committee for religious affairs, Said Akhmedov, who Forum 18 was told is on holiday, Aliyev seemed uninformed about the plans to demolish the synagogue. "Rabbi Abdurakhmanov visited the committee for religious affairs recently, and said nothing about problems with the synagogue," he told Forum 18 on 26 August. Aliyev said the synagogue is situated "quite a long way" from the proposed Palace of Nations and "in my opinion it does not need to be demolished". But he believed that if the synagogue is demolished, then the authorities will have to offer the Jews a plot of land for the construction of a new one.

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