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TAJIKISTAN: Demolition of country's only synagogue begins

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Between 7 and 20 February, the city authorities demolished the ritual bathhouse, classroom and kosher butchery of the synagogue in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe. The only functioning synagogue in Tajikistan, it was built by local Jews a century ago. When a congregation member filmed the destruction officials threatened to break his video-camera, a local resident told Forum 18 News Service. The demolition of the synagogue itself – part of city redevelopment plans – is due to be completed in June, though some fear it could happen sooner. "It is a lie to say that the Dushanbe Jews paid for construction of the synagogue," Shamsuddin Nuriddinov of the city's Religious Affairs Department insisted to Forum 18. "So, if the Jews want to have a synagogue, let them pay for it out of their own funds." The Jewish community – mainly made up of Bukharan Jews – is mostly elderly and poor and cannot afford to build a new synagogue.

On 7 February, the authorities in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe began the demolition of the city's sole synagogue - the only functioning synagogue in the country - a Dushanbe resident who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 News Service on 20 February from the city. So far, the authorities have dismantled only half the synagogue complex. "The government said it will not demolish the rest until June, but there is no guarantee that this promise will be kept," the resident insisted. No compensation is being offered, though the authorities claim they are ready to provide a plot of land on the edge of Dushanbe for the community to build a new synagogue. The synagogue serves the small, mainly Bukharan Jewish community in the city.

"Demolition began without an official assessment or notice and comment period," the Dushanbe resident reported. "The mikvah [ritual bathhouse], classroom, and kosher butchery are gone, while the courtyard is being used as a dump for the debris." The resident told Forum 18 that one young congregation member filmed the demolition on a video recorder until city officials threatened to break the camera if he did not stop filming.

The synagogue was earmarked for demolition more than two years ago, under plans for construction of a "Palace of Nations" (the Tajik President's new residence). In May 2003 Dushanbe's Jewish community received an official letter from the authorities ordering them to vacate the synagogue building by July of that year. However, the Jews continued to use their synagogue for worship. Many other buildings in the area have already been knocked down.

Formally, the synagogue belongs to the state, having been nationalised in 1952, its rabbi Mikhail Abdurakhmanov told Forum 18 in August 2003. But he believes that "by rights the synagogue ought to belong to the Jews who paid for its construction about 100 years ago". He reported then that the authorities had offered a plot of land some distance from central Dushanbe where the community could build a new synagogue, but with only a small, mainly elderly congregation he said the community could not afford to build a new synagogue (see F18News 28 August 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=129 and 21 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=325).

Tahir Rashidov, deputy head of the Tajik government's Religious Affairs Committee, said he knew nothing about the start of demolition work at the synagogue. "The Jewish community has not made any complaints to us about it," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 February. "If they are complaining to foreign journalists instead of contacting us, then one may raise the question of whether the Jewish community should retain its juridical registration."

Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, head of the Religious Affairs Department at the Dushanbe city administration, is equally unsympathetic to the Jews' plight. "This is not the first time that the question of demolishing the synagogue has been exaggerated," he told Forum 18 from Dushanbe on 21 February. "We have set aside land for construction of a synagogue. We have also offered the rabbi, Mikhail Abdurakhmanov, a building to rent where he can hold religious rituals until the new synagogue is built, but he has refused. Mikhail Abdurakhmanov knows that the synagogue has been earmarked for demolition for the past two years, but instead of setting about building a new one, he has simply complained to foreign journalists."

Nuriddinov also stressed that the government has no intention of offering financial compensation for the demolition of the synagogue. "Religion is separate from the state here in Tajikistan. Mosques, churches and other religious buildings are built at the expense of believers."

Nuriddinov claimed that the synagogue building is state property and was offered for use the Jewish community on a temporary basis. "It is a lie to say that the Dushanbe Jews paid for construction of the synagogue," he insisted to Forum 18. "So, if the Jews want to have a synagogue, let them pay for it out of their own funds."

Nevertheless, Forum 18's sources maintain that the Jewish community has documents proving that the Jews did indeed pay for construction of the synagogue. "It's true that Abdurakhmanov turned down some rooms provided by the city administration on a temporary basis for religious rituals," one source admitted to Forum 18. "Most of those attending the synagogue are elderly and very poor, and it is hard for them, both physically and morally, to get to a temporary building provided by the city authorities."

The source pointed to the problems the demolition will produce for the remaining devout Jews in Dushanbe and in the country as a whole. "Leaving aside the legal niceties, one clear fact remains: there is today a real threat that the authorities will destroy the only synagogue left in Tajikistan!"

More coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Tajikistan is at
<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=31&results=50>

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

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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