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Tajikistan's last synagogue slated for demolition

AP (27.05.2004) / HRWF Int. (08.06.2004) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email info@hrwf.net -- One by one, Jewish worshipers unfurl their white-and-blue prayer shawls and mutter a quick blessing to begin one of the last Sabbath services in Tajikistan's only remaining synagogue.

The government of this former Soviet republic has ordered the Jews out of the Dushanbe synagogue by the end of July so it can be demolished with the surrounding neighborhood.

The plain, white building where Jews say they have worshiped for more than a century is to be replaced by a "Palace of Nations" complex, which will serve as Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov's office.

The city has offered several plots on the outskirts of Dushanbe for a new synagogue, but it refuses to offer compensation for the loss of the building, insisting state funds can't be used for religious institutions.

The Jewish community, though, says it has no money to rebuild, and is worried that the synagogue's destruction could encourage anti-Semitism in this Muslim-majority country. The Jews argue they should be given land closer to the current house of worship, which stands in the city center, behind metal gates decorated with Stars of David and menorahs.

"If they are taking away our building, they must give us for free something that can't be worse than the one we have now," said Rabbi Abe David Gurevitch, the Uzbekistan-based chief rabbi for Central Asia.

The Jews in this Central Asian nation are the last holdouts among thousands who emigrated in Soviet times, after the Soviet collapse and during the Tajik civil war in the 1990s. In 1989, more than 12,000 Jews lived in Dushanbe alone; now just 280 Jews remain, of about 480 across the country. Only 14 men attended services on a recent Saturday morning.

Moving the synagogue from the center would force the Orthodox Jewish worshipers to walk long distances from their homes in the traditional Jewish district.

It would also complicate the Jewish community's aid programs. Many of the remaining Jews in Dushanbe are elderly and poor, and several dozen come to the synagogue's adjoining cafeteria daily for free kosher food while others have meals delivered to their homes. A kosher butcher travels to Dushanbe each month from Bukhara to slaughter animals, and poor Jewish families receive donations of meat from the synagogue.

We will still fight. It's been our synagogue for more than 100 years," said Grigory Talisveyber, 46, who recalls that the synagogue was packed for his bar mitzvah.

Shamsuddin Nuriddinov, head of religious affairs in the Dushanbe mayor's office, noted the prominent role Jews have played in Tajik life, but appeared unsympathetic.

"It's a regular, simple one-story house," Nuriddinov said, also noting the sparse attendance at services. "It doesn't have any architectural value."

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