

'Lost tribe' on Fast Track to Israel

Settlers seek to recruit Indian immigrants

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The Israeli government is reported to have quietly approved the fast-track immigration of 7,000 members of a supposedly "lost Jewish" tribe, known as the Bnei Menashe, currently living in a remote area of India.

Under the plan, the "lost Jews" would be brought to Israel over the next two years by right-wing and religious organisations who, critics are concerned, will seek to place them in West Bank settlements in a bid to foil Israel's partial agreement to a temporary freeze of settlement growth.

A previous attempt to bring the Bnei Menashe to Israel was halted in 2003 by Avraham Poraz, the interior minister at the time, after it became clear that most of the 1,500 who had arrived were being sent to extremist settlements, including in the Gaza Strip and next to Hebron, the large Palestinian city in the West Bank.

Dror Etkes, who monitors settlement growth for Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights group, said there were strong grounds for suspecting that some of the new Bnei Menashe would end up in the settlements, too.

"There is a mutual interest being exploited here," he said. "The Bnei Menashe get help to make aliyah [immigration] while the settlements get lots of new arrivals to bolster their numbers, including in settlements close to Palestinian areas where most Israelis would not want to venture."

The government's decision, leaked this month to Ynet, Israel's biggest news website, was made possible by a ruling in 2005 by Shlomo Amar, one of Israel's two chief rabbis, that the Bnei Menashe are one of 10 lost Jewish tribes, supposedly exiled from the Middle East 2,700 years ago.

He ordered a team of rabbis to go to north-east India to begin preparing Bnei Menashe who identified themselves as Jews for conversion to the strictest stream of Judaism, Orthodoxy, so they would qualify to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return.

The Bnei Menashe belong to an ethnic group called the Shinlung, who number more than one million and live mainly in the states of Manipur and Mizoram, close to the border with Myanmar. They were converted from animism to Christianity by British missionaries a century ago, but a small number claim to have kept an ancient connection to Judaism.

DNA samples taken from the Bnei Menashe have failed so far to establish any common ancestry to Jews.

The immigration of the Bnei Menashe following Mr Amar's ruling was quickly halted after the foreign ministry expressed concerns that it was causing a diplomatic falling out with India, which has laws against missionary activity.

Ophir Pines-Paz, the interior minister in 2005, who opposed what he called the "clandestine" arrival of the Bnei Menashe, said in an interview last week: "I was against a policy that sends [Jewish] immigrants to the settlements. I hope that could not be the case today with a settlement freeze in place. I want to believe that is the case."

However, the Bnei Menashe have won two powerful right-wing sponsors: Shavei Israel, led by Michael Freund, a former assistant to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister; and a religious group known as the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which draws on wide support from evangelical Christians in the United States.

Mr Freund began lobbying for the immigration of the Bnei Menashe to Israel while he was an adviser to Mr Netanyahu during his previous premiership, in the late 1990s. Mr Freund is believed to have used his connections in the current government to push the group's case again.

Arik Puder, a spokesman for Shavei Israel, refused to comment, saying the organisation had decided to keep "a low profile" on the decision to bring the Bnei Menashe to Israel. It is believed that Shavei Israel is concerned that the government may come under pressure to reverse its decision if there is too much public scrutiny.

According to Ynet, Israel is planning to avoid diplomatic complications with India by sending groups of Bnei Menashe to Nepal for a fast-track conversion.

The brand of Judaism the Bnei Menashe have been exposed to during their "Jewish education" in special camps in India was indicated by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, who has worked closely with the tribe since the early 1980s. He said he believed in the biblical prophecy of a coming apocalypse - one shared by "End of Days" evangelical Christians - in which "all the world is against Israel" in a battle to be decided in Jerusalem.

"I believe we are very close to the time when the Messiah will arrive and we must prepare by making sure that all the Jews are in the Land of Israel. There are more than six million among the lost tribes and they must be brought to Israel as a matter of urgency."

Shimon Gangte, 33, who was helped by Mr Avichail to come to Israel 13 years ago, is among 500 Bnei Menashe living in Kiryat Arba, an extremist settlement whose armed inhabitants regularly clash with Palestinians in neighbouring Hebron. He said: "It is important that the 10 tribes are brought here because the time of the Messiah is near."

Mr Gangte added that the Bnei Menashe were attracted to the West Bank because life was cheaper in the settlements than in Israel and the settlers "give us help finding housing, jobs and schools for our children".

Mr Etkes of Yesh Din said "past experience" fed suspicions that the Bnei Menashe would be encouraged to settle deep in the West Bank, adding that the so-called settlement freeze, insisted on by the United States as a prelude to renewed peace talks, was having little effect on the ground.

“There is no freeze because it is being violated all the time. The settlers had lots of time to prepare for the freeze and spent the four to five months before it in a frenzy of construction activity.”

Shavei Israel lobbies for other groups of Jews to be brought to Israel, including communities in Spain, Portugal, Italy, South America, Russia, Poland and China.

Israeli peace groups were outraged in 2002 when Shavei Israel placed a group of 100 Peruvian immigrants, whose ancestors converted to Judaism 50 years ago, in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc in the West Bank.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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