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Israel to Speed Immigration for Jews in Ethiopia

By GREG MYRE

JERUSALEM, Jan. 31 - At least 15,000 Ethiopian Jews, many living in hovels near the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa, will be brought to Israel by the end of 2007 under an accelerated immigration process, the Israeli government said Monday.

The decision is intended to help settle a long-running question over the status of an Ethiopian community known as the Falash Mura.

"We are very happy the government has finally agreed to a timetable for bringing the people here," said Avraham Neguise, executive director of South Wing to Zion, which assists Ethiopian Jews.

However, Mr. Neguise said Israel had been slow to carry out previous decisions on the immigration of Ethiopian Jews. He also described their conditions in Ethiopia as quite difficult, saying he hoped they could come sooner.

Close to 100,000 Ethiopian Jews have immigrated to Israel since the mid-1980's, but for many years, Israel was unable to decide on how to deal with one specific group, the Falash Mura. The Falash Mura say they are descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity many years ago, often through coercion, but have resumed practicing Judaism.

During the 1990's, some Israeli authorities questioned the authenticity of the community's Jewish roots. Israeli officials also expressed concerns that they would be confronted by large numbers of impoverished Ethiopians claiming Jewish ancestry and seeking to immigrate.

Three years ago, the government sent a prominent rabbi to consider the case of the Falash Mura, and he reported solid evidence of their Jewish lineage. The government decided in February 2003 that all the Falash Mura who could document Jewish ancestry on their mother's side would be allowed into Israel.

About 15,000 to 20,000 Falash Mura are believed to fall into that category, according to the government and supporters of the Falash Mura. But Israel has been allowing only 300 to enter each month.

Under the Monday decision, the government will permit 600 Falash Mura to come each month, beginning June 1, and the immigration should be completed by the end of 2007, the prime minister's office said.

In Addis Ababa, thousands of the Falash Mura have moved into hovels on a hillside near the Israeli Embassy. Thousands more are in Gondar, in the north.

"We are grateful to God," Meles Mandefro, a Falash Mura, said in a telephone interview. "The whole community will be delighted when they hear this." Mr. Mandefro left his farmland and moved to Addis Ababa, where he has been waiting nearly a decade with his wife and five children. Many of their relatives are already

in Israel.

The Jewish Agency for Israel, a quasi-governmental body, is to help the Falash Mura in Addis Ababa with the immigration. The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry has been providing aid there.

Marc Lacey contributed reporting from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for this article.