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Israel will soon welcome from India descendants of a 'lost' Jewish tribe

By: Dina Kraft

TEL AVIV, Sept. 26 (JTA) — A group of 218 people from a remote mountainous corner of northeastern India who claim descent from one of the lost biblical tribes will be immigrating to Israel as recognized Jews for the first time.

The aliyah of members from the Bnei Menashe community to Israel is a turning point, said Michael Freund, founder of Shavei Israel which assists “lost Jews” seeking to return to the Jewish people.

“This is a major historical event, because these members of a lost tribe of Israel, after 27 centuries of wandering in exile, will at last be coming home,” he said.

News of the planned arrival in November of 218 Bnei Menashe, who have already undergone official conversion in India, was made public for the first time on Tuesday after it was leaked to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot.

The government decision to bring the 218 to Israel followed months of bureaucratic wrangling in which Israel’s Interior Ministry and Absorption Ministry balked at plans to bring them here, Freund told JTA.

Advocates have been working for years to convince Israeli authorities that the Bnei Menashe were indeed long-lost Jews who had returned to the faith. They hope this group will pave the way for others in the community to also make aliyah.

The group of immigrants went through conversion courses and were approved for conversion by rabbinical judges sent to India last year by Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

Amar has declared Bnei Menashe “descendants of the Jewish people” and has been working to help facilitate the aliyah of those who want to live in Israel.

To date, many of the some 1,000 members of the community – who arrived in the country as tourists and later converted to Judaism and became citizens – live in West Bank settlements. Some also lived in settlements in the Gaza Strip until last year’s Israeli withdrawal.

The decision to place them predominately in settlements has drawn criticism.

Their advocates say the move was not a political but a practical decision. They say the settlements were among the only communities in the country willing to financially help the Bnei Menashe who arrived in Israel and had to spend their first year studying for conversion, without much time to hold down jobs.

Tzvi Khaute, 32, lives in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, on the outskirts of Hebron, where the largest number of Bnei Menashe reside. He welcomes the government decision to bring more of his community to Israel as Jewish immigrants for the first time.

“It really is a dream come true,” said Khaute, who studies in a yeshiva part-time and works for the Shavei offices.

The group that is scheduled to arrive in November will be living for the first year in absorption centers in the northern towns of Carmiel and Nazareth Ilit.

Some 7,000 Bnei Menashe live in the northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur. They trace their descent to the tribe of Menashe, one of the 10 tribes expelled from ancient Israel by the Assyrians.

They claim their ancestors wandered eastward toward China, then eventually settled to the south in what is now northeastern India and nearby Myanmar.

Most of the community converted to Christianity at the turn of the 20th century. In recent decades, some have returned to the Judaism their ancestors have practiced for centuries, including observing Shabbat, keeping the laws of kashrut, practicing circumcision on the eighth day of a baby boy’s life and observing the laws of family purity.

The Jewish Agency will be facilitating their absorption into Israel.

Freund said some \$1 million in financial support for the undertaking will be provided by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, a Chicago-based group that has raised tens of millions of dollars from Christian supporters of Israel.