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Nov 15, 2004

Saved for a year, village mosque may be made national heritage

By Natalie Soh

THE old kampung mosque along Jalan Mempurong in Sembawang was given a year's reprieve from the bulldozers on Hari Raya itself yesterday, much to the delight of worshippers.



BUILT IN 1959: Worshippers will get another year to pray at this rustic one-storey Pertempatan Melayu Sembawang Mosque, which Dr Tan said is 'possibly the last kampung mosque left in Singapore'. -- MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

And if a case can be made for the mosque to be preserved as a national heritage site, it may stay for good.

The good news was delivered by Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan during his annual Hari Raya visit to the Pertempatan Melayu Sembawang Mosque.

To loud cheers, he announced that he had managed to get Minister for National Development Mah Bow Tan to agree to put off demolishing the mosque for a year.

The 45-year-old place of worship, which is metres from the beachfront, was to have been vacated by the end of the year, and pulled down as part of the Mosque Redevelopment Scheme.

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A \$9 million replacement, the Assyafaah Mosque along Admiralty Lane, about 10 minutes away, was completed in April this year.

The Pertempatan Melayu Sembawang Mosque's committee had been appealing to keep the place from being torn down since 1972.

Dr Tan said the place was possibly the last kampung mosque left in Singapore, and that he felt emotionally attached to it, having spent his first Hari Raya there 25 years ago, when he was elected MP for the area.

Every year since, it has become a tradition for him to break fast with the community at the mosque after prayers.

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The mosque was built in 1959 by villagers in the area with the help of the Lee Foundation. It was the focal point of the kampung there.

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Today, the one-storey building looks as if it is locked in a time warp.

Large cockerels and hens sit in a coop in the grounds, rattan mats line the floors, and a sea breeze blows gently through the worship hall.

The kampung's residents moved out decades ago, but return there to pray every Friday and on special occasions, like Hari Raya.

One of them is Mr Halil Haji Mansor, 39, an executive officer with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis).

Although he now lives in Bishan, he still takes his four children with him to the mosque, and has been praying there every other day during Ramadan.

Yesterday, Dr Tan cautioned that the Government may still redevelop the area after the year is up.

Land in Singapore is scarce, he said, and that which the mosque stands on could be needed.

However, a committee - headed by Sembawang GRC MP Mohd Maliki Osman - intends to put up a proposal for the building to be declared a national heritage site.

Said Dr Tan: 'If the land is not needed for redevelopment, it may be worthwhile to preserve it.

'Schoolchildren and people from all races and religions can come visit and get a feel of what Singapore was like 30, 40 years ago.'

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