

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN ARMENIA**STATEMENT by the EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES****For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 23 September to 4 October 2013**

The 25,000 persons in Armenia who attend religious services held by Jehovah's Witnesses appreciate their freedom of worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses are pleased to report that the long-standing issue of the arrest and imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service has finally been addressed.

When Armenia became a member of the Council of Europe (CoE) on 26 April 2002, it committed itself "to adopt, within three years of accession, a law on alternative service in compliance with European standards and, in the meantime, to pardon all conscientious objectors sentenced to prison terms."

No such law was enacted. The alternative service law enacted in 2004 did not meet CoE standards and since alternative service was under military control and supervision, Jehovah's Witnesses could not conscientiously accept it. Consequently, from April 2002 through June 2013, Armenia convicted more than 380 Jehovah's Witnesses who conscientiously objected to military service to a combined total of nearly 800 years of imprisonment.

The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights recognized the imprisonment of conscientious objectors as a violation of fundamental rights. On 7 July 2011, in the landmark judgment of *Bayatyan v. Armenia*, the Grand Chamber ruled that the right to conscientious objection to military service is fully protected by Article 9 of the European Convention. The European Court confirmed this judgment in two subsequent decisions against Armenia and another against Turkey.

In response, on 21 May 2013, the Republic of Armenia amended its law to provide conscientious objectors the right to substitute alternative civilian service for compulsory military service. With enabling regulations adopted on 25 July 2013, the law prohibits any military supervision or control over alternative civilian service and places "alternative labour workers" under the control and supervision of civilian authorities, such as the Ministry of Health. Armenia removed the punitive elements of the law, reducing the term of alternative service from 42 months to 36 months, serving a maximum of 48 hours a week. In most cases, the alternative labor servant will live at home and will perform his assigned work within 30 kilometres of his residence. No conscientious objectors have been prosecuted or imprisoned since the new law came into force.

Although the law on alternative civilian service is now in harmony with European standards, it remains up to each young man to make his own conscientious decision whether or not to accept it. About 100 conscientious objectors who are Jehovah's Witnesses (from the 2012 and 2013 call up) have already applied for the new programme of alternative labour service.

The families of the 29 conscientious objectors currently imprisoned under the former law remain very concerned that the young men have still not been released.

A respectful request

Jehovah's Witnesses are thankful to the government of Armenia for enacting a programme of alternative civilian service. They respectfully request that the government immediately and unconditionally release their 29 fellow believers who remain imprisoned as conscientious objectors to military service.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Armenia attending the conference to promote a constructive dialogue.