

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN ARMENIA

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

The 25,000 Armenian citizens who attend religious services held by Jehovah's Witnesses appreciate their freedom of worship. They would also like to express their gratitude that 14 large religious conventions were held this year without disruption or cancellations.

However, the issue persists of Armenia's failure to comply with its international commitments to offer a genuine alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, to pardon all those who had been convicted as such, and release those who are currently in prison. We have raised this issue at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting every year since 2001!

In July 2011, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights condemned Armenia for this failure in the case of *Bayatyan v Armenia*. Mr. Vahan Bayatyan was just one of the almost 400 Jehovah's Witnesses who, since 2001, have been convicted and imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service. There was no possibility for him to perform genuine civilian service, which has been the case for all those who have faced imprisonment for conscientious objection. In the *Bayatyan* judgment, the European Court of Human Rights urged Armenia to take the necessary steps to correct this situation without waiting for possible future new legislation.

This summer, during its 105th session, the UN Human Rights Committee also urged Armenia to offer a genuine alternative to military service and to release all imprisoned conscientious objectors. This injunction was in harmony with the report of the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of March 2012.

Is Armenia now complying with these binding decisions and recommendations? Sadly, the prosecutor's office and the courts of Armenia continue to prosecute and imprison young Christian men who are conscientious objectors. Since the *Bayatyan* judgment, criminal investigations and prosecutions have been initiated against 46 other young Witness men. Of these, 22 have been convicted and sentenced to prison ranging from 24 to 30 months. In 10 of these cases, the Cassation Court has already dismissed their appeals; the other appeals are yet pending. The remaining 24 cases are pending in the trial court or investigator's office. More information on this situation can be found in the written statement that has been posted on the OSCE website.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully implore the government of Armenia to immediately implement the *Bayatyan* judgment which means to release all conscientious objectors and stop all prosecutions against them.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Armenia attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.