

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKMENISTAN

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

For the OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Astana, 29 and 30 June 2010

In 2009 the **TURKMENISTAN** authorities resumed imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service. Currently five Jehovah's Witnesses are each serving prison sentences of up to two years because their religious conscience does not allow them to serve in the army. At present, Turkmenistan does not offer genuine alternative civilian service that would be acceptable to many young Jehovah's Witnesses.

On April 16, 2005, Turkmenistan's former president granted a special amnesty to four Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for conscientious objection. In 2007, three Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned for conscientious objection, but their prison terms were later commuted to suspended sentences and at least two of them were fully pardoned.

However, though having received two-year conditional sentences last year for their conscientious objection to military service, on May 21, 2009, Sakhetmurad (age 22) and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov (age 21) a court in Dashoguz ordered them to serve their two-year sentence in prison.

On July 13, 2009 Shadurdy Uchotov (age 22) was found guilty and the court sentenced him to two-year imprisonment. Akmurat Yegendurdyev (age 20) was found guilty and the court sentenced him to a year-and-half term of imprisonment on July 29, 2009. In both cases they appealed their convictions, however, in vain.

Navruz Nasyrlyayev (age 19) of Dashoguz was drafted to the army, when he became 18 years old in March 2009. He refused at three occasions due to his religious beliefs. Thereafter his case was brought to the Dashoguz City Court. On December 7, 2009 he was sentenced to two years in an open colony. He appealed and on January 3, 2010 the Regional Court kept the decision unchanged. In the meantime he was also transferred to the Seydi labor colony where the other four prisoners of conscience are also serving their sentences.

Recently all five conscientious objectors were accused for allegedly "violating the prison routine", thus becoming not eligible for amnesty.

**We appeal to the authorities of Turkmenistan to apply amnesties to the five prisoners of conscience and set them free so that they can be with their families. In harmony with the directive of the Council of Europe, the introduction of a genuine alternative civilian service could help these young men to be of benefit to their country without violating their conscience. We hope that our appeal will be received. An amnesty for these five men would demonstrate the willingness of the authorities to respect freedom of conscience in Turkmenistan.**

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

---