

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKEY

STATEMENT by the EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 22 September to 3 October 2014

Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkey enjoy relative freedom to worship. For the most part, they are able to meet for peaceful religious worship and can practice their faith. However, the government of Turkey refuses to recognize conscientious objection to military service and has no provision for alternative service. Additionally, municipal officials throughout the country have refused to properly classify the Kingdom Halls (houses of worship) of Jehovah's Witnesses as legal 'places of worship' on their zoning maps.

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Denial of the right to conscientious objection

01 October 2014

As of **June 2014**, 53 Witnesses are facing prosecution as conscientious objectors to military service. The government of Turkey subjects Witness conscientious objectors to multiple call-ups for military duty, repeated fines, and threats of imprisonment in spite of three European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments against it on this issue (*Buldu and Others v. Turkey*, no. 14017/08, 3 June 2014; *Feti Demirtaş v. Turkey*, no. 5260/07, 17 January 2012; and *Erçep v. Turkey*, no. 43965/04, 22 November 2011). Turkey also ignores the favorable UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR) Views—*Atasoy and Sarkut v. Turkey* (CCPR/C/104/D/1853-1854/2008 [29 March 2012]).

Denial of zoning for houses of worship

In 2003, Turkey modified its Law on Zoning No. 3194 in order to comply with European standards on non-discrimination and freedom of religion, providing non-Muslim religious minorities the right to build and own places of worship. In practice, however, municipal authorities and domestic courts have refused to implement this provision and routinely refuse to grant a 'place of worship' status for Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses.

To date, 29 different municipalities have denied 91 requests made by Jehovah's Witnesses to obtain a 'religious facility location' on municipal zoning maps. Not one Kingdom Hall in Turkey has been zoned as a place of worship.

Because the government rejects registration of Kingdom Halls, they can close them any time they choose. The Witnesses must also unjustly pay property taxes because their Kingdom Halls are not properly zoned as religious facilities.

On **12 June 2014**, the ECHR notified Jehovah's Witnesses that it had requested Turkey to submit observations on the Witnesses' pending applications on Kingdom Hall zoning issues and invited the Witnesses to reply to the government's submittal. The ECHR will consider the applications after receiving input from the government and the Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Turkey to implement an alternative civilian service program in harmony with European standards and to allow them to build and register places of worship by properly applying the zoning law.

Scan the QR code below to read more information about Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkey on jw.org:

