

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN OSCE MEMBER STATES

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ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES
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In a number of OSCE Member States Jehovah's Witnesses are being unjustly imprisoned because of their religious beliefs.

On 16 July 2010, a Court in **Azerbaijan** convicted 22-year-old Farid Mammadov for evasion of military service. He was sentenced to nine-months' imprisonment even though he had the lawful ground to refuse on account of his conscientious objection to bearing weapons and joining the military. Mr. Mammadov is ready and willing to perform alternative civilian service that is not under military control. In 2000, Azerbaijan agreed to bring into force within two years an alternative civilian service law compliant with European standards and in the meantime not to imprison conscientious objectors. Now ten years later it has failed to do so.

The same problem still exists in **Armenia**. Despite its commitments as a member of the Council of Europe, currently, 75 Jehovah's Witnesses have been tried, convicted, and imprisoned under the Criminal Code for their conscientious refusal of military service on religious grounds. Armenia's law on alternative service fails to comply with European standards. On 10 May 2010, a panel of five judges of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights accepted Mr. Vahan Bayatyan's request to have his case reviewed. Bayatyan was convicted as a conscientious objector. An oral hearing is scheduled for 24 November, 2010 and the decision of the Grand Chamber on this issue is expected to have a major impact on countries that don't recognize the right of conscientious objectors.

In **Turkey**, 11 Jehovah's Witnesses are currently facing prosecution as conscientious objectors. Several young men have been repeatedly prosecuted and imprisoned. Yunus Ercep, whose case is currently before the European Court, was prosecuted 35 times since 1999 for his stand on this issue. A military court persists in prosecuting Baris Gormez even though the European Court has asked them to hold off until Bayatyan is decided.

We call on the governments of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey to recognize conscientious objection to military service and allow for acceptable alternative service.

Turkmenistan offers no acceptable alternative service programme to many young Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors. Seven young men are serving either a two-year or two-and-a-half year prison sentence, five in the Seydi labour colony and two in prison in Turkmenabad. Recently the five conscientious objectors in the Seydi colony were accused of allegedly "violating the prison routine" thus not becoming eligible for amnesty. We call on the government of Turkmenistan to grant amnesty to the imprisoned conscientious objectors.

In **Uzbekistan**, the government has registered one congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Chirchik, but has repeatedly rejected attempts at registration by other congregations. Without registration, Jehovah's Witnesses are subject to arrest and prosecution for reading the Bible and religious publications, even in their own homes. Olim Turayev is a 34-year-old medical doctor from Samarkand, and father of three small children. He has been serving a four-year prison sentence since 25 April 2008. He was charged with teaching his religious beliefs to others and organizing illegal religious activity. Abdubannob Akhmedov, aged 32, from Fergana, has been serving a four-year prison sentence since 23 July 2008, for violating Article 216 of the Uzbekistan Criminal Code, which penalizes activity of unregistered religious organizations. Sergey Ivanov, aged 20, was sentenced 23 July 2008, to three and a half years in an "open" labour colony for religious activity. These prison sentences would be eliminated if the government were to accept applications for registration of local congregations.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives from any of these countries to discuss these serious issues.