

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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UA 81/93 Fear of Ill-treatment/Legal Concern

24 March 1993

GREECE: Charalambos (Babis) Andreopoulos

Amnesty International is concerned that the military authorities in Greece are contravening Greek law, systematically applying policies of religious discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses and could be about to imprison a religious minister illegally, in conditions which may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Charalambos Andreopoulos, a recognized minister of the Jehovah's Witness religion, faces harsh jail conditions in a disciplinary cell as a prisoner of conscience, for abiding by his creed's conscientious objection to military service.

The authorities are threatening to flout the automatic exemption from compulsory military service which should be granted to all religious ministers under legislation introduced in 1988.

The last chance of avoiding imprisonment would be an intervention from ministerial level. Andreopoulos' first claim for exemption was refused on the grounds that the Jehovah's Witnesses Watchtower Society "is not a religion, but operates with an economic and political scope". His later appeal to the Ministry of Defence has also been rejected.

Andreopoulos has now been called up to enlist with the 563 Infantry Battalion at Nigrita, Serres in northern Greece on 29 March. As a Jehovah's Witness, he is opposed to performing any form of military service. Amnesty International believes that his imprisonment would be merely for exercising of his right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. If he is imprisoned Amnesty International will recognize him as a prisoner of conscience.

Amnesty International is further concerned about detention conditions in the disciplinary cell at Nigrita, Serres, where he may be held. Detainees are held in damp unheated cells without windows which have an area of 4 square metres. The cells contain only a bench, making sleep very difficult. Guards have often neglected to provide food for detainees.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 1988 four Jehovah's Witness ministers have spent periods of up to three years in prison after the military authorities refused to recognize their status as religious ministers. All of them were recognized as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. One of them, Tasos Georgiades, who was released in July 1992, was imprisoned and tried on three separate occasions within six months. He also applied to the Council of State, the highest administrative court in Greece, which ruled (as in the cases of his three colleagues) that he was a minister of a recognized religion and was entitled to exemption under Greek law. By the time he gained his freedom, Tasos Georgiades had spent some 2,000,000 drachmas on legal costs (roughly the equivalent of a year's salary).

There are about 400 conscientious objectors in prison in Greece at any given time. The majority are Jehovah's Witnesses who spend up to three years in prison. Greek law makes no provision for alternative civilian service although the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers have all called on states to do so. Amnesty International considers all conscientious objectors imprisoned in Greece to be prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate release and on the Greek Government to introduce alternative civilian service in line with international recommendations.

Amnesty International believes the Greek government will be swayed by the international public outcry against this unlawful religious discrimination.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express and airmail letters either in English or in your own language:

- expressing concern that the military authorities are applying discriminatory treatment, contrary to Greek law and threatening to imprison Charalambos Andreopoulos on 29 March in the disciplinary cell at 563 Infantry Battalion at Nigrita, Serres;

- expressing concern that the military authorities have rejected a valid claim for exemption from military service on the grounds that the Jehovah's Witness faith is not a religion

- expressing concern that the detention conditions in the disciplinary cell may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment;

- urging that interventions be made to press the military authorities to reconsider his case, particularly in the light of the Council of State ruling in favour of four other Jehovah's Witness ministers in recent years;

- pointing out that if he is imprisoned Amnesty International will consider him to be a prisoner of conscience.

APPEALS TO

1) Mr Ioannis Varvitsiotis
Minister of National Defence
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**Telegrams: Minister Varvitsiotis,
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Salutation: Dear Minister

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Salutation: Dear Minister

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and to diplomatic representatives of Greece accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 5 May 1993.