

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 1997 ACTION ON THE RIGHT TO CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN EUROPE

The right to conscientious objection to military service is not a marginal concern outside the mainstream of international human rights protection and promotion. The right to conscientious objection is a basic component of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - as defined by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. It has been recognized as such in resolutions and recommendations adopted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

These bodies have all urged governments to guarantee that individuals objecting to compulsory military service because of their conscientiously held beliefs are given the opportunity to perform an alternative service. They have stated explicitly in a number of resolutions that this alternative service should be of a genuinely civilian character and of a length which cannot be considered to be a punishment. They have recommended that individuals be permitted to register as conscientious objectors at any point in time before their conscription, after call-up papers have been issued, or during military service.

Amnesty International (AI) considers a conscientious objector to be any person liable to conscription for military service or registration for conscription to military service who refuses to perform armed service or any other direct or indirect participation in wars or armed conflicts for reasons of conscience or profound conviction. Their profound conviction may arise from religious, ethical, moral, humanitarian, philosophical, political or similar motives.

Wherever such a person is detained or imprisoned because they have been refused their right to register an objection or to perform a genuinely alternative service, AI will adopt that person as a prisoner of conscience. Its world-wide membership in more than 190 countries around the globe campaigns actively for the immediate and unconditional release of such imprisoned conscientious objectors. The organization also adopts as prisoners of conscience those objectors who are imprisoned or detained because of their refusal to perform an alternative service which is not of a purely civilian character, or of a length which could be considered punitive (that is, twice the length of ordinary military service).

In order to raise the profile of its mandate on the issue of conscientious objection, AI's Europe Regional Program will launch a major new public action on the issue in April 1997. The launch of the action coincides with the 53rd session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights - where the issue of conscientious objection to military service is on the agenda for consideration again next year. Running until the end of June 1997, the campaign will mobilize

public pressure on those governments in Europe who have yet to guarantee their citizens the right to conscientious objection to military service - or whose provision of alternative service is judged to be inadequate in relation to international and European human rights standards. The campaign will aim to promote the necessary legislative change through a variety of action techniques - including letter-writing and petitions to government ministers and members of parliament, as well as visits to embassies and foreign ministries. Members of AI will be provided with an action circular for the campaign, offering detailed recommendations for action on specific countries.

But legislative change alone will not be sufficient to guarantee widespread recognition of conscientious objection to military service as a basic component of one of the most fundamental of all human rights - freedom of thought, conscience and religion. A substantial and creative human rights promotion initiative is required - most especially in areas of Central and Eastern Europe. To this end, AI's campaign will also aim to raise public awareness of the issue through an imaginative media strategy and a series of public meetings and events held in selected European countries. We want to deliver our message - that conscientious objection to military service is an internationally recognized human right - to the widest possible audience of young people of secondary school and university age.

Our intention is to promote a vigorous and informed public discussion about conscientious objection among educators, students, politicians, religious groups and the media in countries where it is most needed, or where the level of consciousness about the issue is particularly low. Through approaches to critical regional media outlets, such as MTV Europe, BBC World Service and Radio Free Europe, we hope to take news of our campaign to young people living in those areas of the continent where information about conscientious objection is especially scarce.

On 15 April AI plans to launch the campaign in Moscow with a press conference, a roundtable discussion with relevant Russian NGOs and members of parliament, and a seminar on conscientious objection for university students. Participants in the press conference will include representatives of AI, as well as conscientious objectors from a number of European countries - including the Russian Federation. On that date AI will publish a new report outlining the organization's current concerns on conscientious objection in Europe, as well as a detailed report on the situation of conscientious objectors in Russia. Complementing the Moscow launch, AI will hold a training workshop on research and campaigning techniques for members of the Organization of Soldiers' Mothers of St Petersburg, an NGO working with conscientious objectors to military service.

AI will also produce an information sheet introducing conscientious objection to military service as a basic human right for distribution throughout the campaign. With the assistance of local NGOs working with conscientious objectors throughout Europe, it is hoped that this will be made available in a number of languages - including Russian, Greek, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and Serbian-Croatian-Bosnian.

Close cooperation with regional and local organizations of conscientious objectors will be a primary focus of AI's campaign. At a November 1996 conference on conscientious objection and the Balkans held in Budapest, concrete plans were made for extensive collaboration on education and promotion with the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) and its constituent member organizations. These plans include a series of seminars on conscientious objection as a human right at universities in Serbia, Romania, Poland and Portugal.

AI will also participate in a conference organized by EBCO in Linz, Austria, in May 1997, on the occasion of the dedication of a memorial at the site of the Mauthausen concentration camp to the 20,000 deserters from the army of Nazi Germany who were executed during the Second World War. The conference will in part focus on the situation of conscientious objectors and deserters from the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.

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