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CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN EUROPE: THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

Moscow -- The right to conscientious objection to military service is a basic component of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and not a marginal concern as many European States seem to perceive it, Amnesty International said today.

During the launch of its Europe wide campaign to promote and protect the rights of conscientious objectors in the continent, the human rights organization criticized a number of European States for denying many of their citizens this right, despite its being clearly recognized in both United Nations and European standards.

"Many European states continue to enjoy membership in the continent's political and economic institutions while at the same time denying a range of basic human rights to at least some of their citizens -- including the right to conscientious objection," Amnesty International said. "This situation is entirely unacceptable, and the respective governments must be encouraged to amend the necessary legislation without further delay."

Amnesty International has therefore expressed extreme concern at recent reports indicating that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights is unlikely to adopt a resolution on the right to conscientious objection at its 53rd session, currently under way in Geneva. For the past decade, the Commission has at the very least reaffirmed every two years its 1987 statement that conscientious objection is 'a legitimate exercise of freedom of thought, conscience and religion'.

"The failure of the Commission to renew its call this year sends an unwelcome signal to many governments, and is a disturbing

silence that does little to support the plight of imprisoned conscientious objectors and those otherwise denied this basic human right in other regions of the world," Amnesty International said.

According to Amnesty International, recent armed conflicts like the ones in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya have highlighted dramatically the shortcomings or complete absence of provision for conscientious objectors to military service in the successor states of the socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and in the Russian Federation.

"During the war in Chechnya, for instance, the lack of any form of alternative service for those opposed to all war or to that particular conflict resulted in large numbers of deserters, some of whom were reportedly executed by the military authorities following their capture," Amnesty International said.

A number of Western European states currently retain unsatisfactory legislation on conscientious objection. France, Italy and Spain, for instance, make no provision for conscientious objection developed during military service. France, in addition, offers a civilian service which -- at twice the length of ordinary military service -- is clearly punitive. Austria has a very restrictive time limit for the submission of applications for alternative service.

The continuing failure of the Greek Government to introduce a genuinely alternative service under civilian control has resulted in hundreds of men being tried and imprisoned for their refusal to perform military service each year -- the vast majority Jehovah's Witnesses whose religious beliefs do not permit them to serve in the armed forces in any capacity whatsoever.

Similarly, Turkey continues to deny conscientious objectors an alternative civilian service, in spite of the country's increasingly close relationship to the European Union and its membership in the Council of Europe and NATO.

"All member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe should re-examine their legislation on conscientious objection in the light of current international resolutions and recommendations," Amnesty International said.

The organization also calls on the European Parliament to adopt a resolution making clear that recognition of the right to

conscientious objection to military service and the introduction of an alternative civilian service of a non-punitive length will form part of the criteria for the admission of new members to the European Union in the future.

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•Amnesty International 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. Wherever such a person is detained or imprisoned solely because they have been refused their right to register an objection or to perform a genuinely alternative service, Amnesty International will adopt that person as a prisoner of conscience.

•Participating in Amnesty International's Moscow launch will be representatives of the Council of Europe, the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection, and conscientious objectors and human rights activists from a number of European countries. The launch will also include a roundtable discussion with invited Russian parliamentarians and government officials on the specific situation in the Russian Federation

•To coincide with the launch of its Europe-wide campaign, Amnesty International has published two new documents on the subject -- *Out of the Margins: The Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe* and *Russian Federation: The Right to Conscientious Objection to Military Service*

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