

EXTERNAL

8 April 1994

Roman GRECHKO

Kazakhstan

Amnesty International is appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of Roman Grechko, a conscientious objector sentenced on 30 March 1994 to one year's imprisonment by a court in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan, for refusing to perform compulsory military service. Since the law in Kazakhstan does not offer an alternative to compulsory military service for all people who declare a conscientious objection to it, Amnesty International regards Roman Grechko as a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of conscience.

Roman Grechko's refusal to perform military service stems from his religious beliefs: he is a Jehovah's Witness. At his trial, in the people's court of October district in Almaty, he is reported to have stated: "I take this step without hesitation. Here it is a question of principles, and to suffer in the name of the Lord is always to be considered an honour." The court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in an ordinary regime labour colony for violating Article 66 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan ("evasion of active military service").

Conscientious objection to military service is recognized by the United Nations as a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, a right guaranteed under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Republic of Kazakhstan is a party to the ICCPR by virtue of its status as a successor state of the USSR, which ratified the ICCPR in 1973.

Background information

There is currently no provision in Kazakhstan for a civilian alternative to compulsory military service for all people who object to such service on grounds of conscience. An Amnesty International delegation which visited Kazakhstan in April 1992 was informed by senior officials that the question of introducing alternative service was being considered in the context of discussions about a new law on military service.

However, a senior official who wrote to Amnesty International early in 1993, following the passage of this new law, stated that according to the law "on general military duty and military service" the only people exempt from call-up to military service were men who had taken holy orders or who had "work duties" in one of the registered religious faiths.