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Joint appeal calling for rights of conscientious objectors

Amnesty International today called on the Macedonian government to make amendments to its Law of Defence in a joint appeal with the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. The Law of Defence sets out the premises for military service in Macedonia and Amnesty International is concerned about its lack of compatibility with existing international recommendations.

Specifically with respect to conscientious objection Amnesty International said: "The law fails to recognize that a conflict of conscience may occur at any moment in a person's life and does not allow applications for conscientious objector status at any time, including during military service or while on reserve duties". The organization is also concerned about the punitive length of the alternative to military service, 14 months as opposed to nine months military service and the lack of guarantees that the alternative service will be of a purely civilian character and under civilian control.

Under the new law, military service will be compulsory for all men aged between 17 and 55 years. Having received a notice to appear for recruitment men have 15 days to apply for conscientious objector status.

Amnesty International and the Helsinki Committee are aware of three men, all Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been imprisoned for up to three months during the last year as a result of their conscientious objections to performing military service. The three have expressed their willingness to perform a civilian alternative service.

The new law offers no opportunity for the three men to fulfil their obligations with an alternative civilian service as they have already been registered for military service (called for recruitment). The 15-day period in which to apply for alternative service is available only to new recruits. These men may thus face further prosecution and imprisonment.

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