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**AUSTRIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CRITICIZES DRAFT LEGISLATION ON
CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION**

New draft legislation on conscientious objection undermines the basic right to freedom of conscience, Amnesty International said today.

"Conscientious objectors to military service are exercising a most fundamental human right which international standards provide may never be derogated from, even in time of war or public emergency," the organization said.

Amnesty International wrote to the Austrian Minister of Internal Affairs last week to express its concern about the new Alternative Civilian Service Law (*Zivildienstgesetz-Novelle 1995*) shortly to be discussed by the Austrian Government and to be presented to the Austrian parliament (*Nationalrat*) for approval.

The new legislation retains the restriction, first introduced at the beginning of last year, on the time limits within which conscientious objectors to military service must submit their applications for alternative civilian service.

"Conscientious objectors should have the right to claim conscientious objector status at any time," Amnesty International said. "We would regard conscientious objectors who are denied the right to do so, and who are imprisoned as a consequence, as prisoners of conscience."

Amnesty International first raised this issue with the Austrian authorities when the restrictions were discussed by the Austrian parliament in January 1994. They were adopted a month later in legislation which expires at the end of this year. The organization received no substantive replies to its letters to the Austrian authorities.

The new legislative proposal leaves unchanged the requirement that conscientious objectors to military service must submit their applications for alternative civilian service within one month of receiving notification of fitness to serve. Young men eligible for military service will not get another chance to register their conscientious objection until five years have elapsed, by which time they may have been issued with call-up papers.

Indeed another legislative proposal to restrict the possibilities for draftees to apply for a postponement of military service while they undertake education or training makes it even more likely that people who develop a conscientious objection to military service after the one month period has elapsed will be called up before they are again eligible to apply for alternative service. Refusal to report for military service or to obey military orders is punishable by up to two years imprisonment.

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT
1 Euston Street, London WC1X 8DJ, United Kingdom
Tel: (44) (71) 413 5500 Telegrams: Amnesty London WC1 Telex: 28502 AMNSTY G FAX: (44) (71) 936 1157
E-mail: (GreenNet) amnestyis@gn.apc.org, (GeoNet) amnesty.is@mcr1.geonet.de
As from 16 April 1995: Tel: (44) (171) 413 5500 Fax: (44) (171) 936 1157