

Greece: Conscientious objector faces imprisonment

Legal proceedings against conscientious objector Lazaros Petromelidis should be suspended pending a review of the legal provisions relating to alternative civilian service in Greece, Amnesty International said today.

On 16 April the Military Court of Appeal is due to hear an appeal against the four-year prison sentence given to Lazaros Petromelidis in April 1999 by the Naval Court of Piraeus on charges of "insubordination in time of general mobilisation".

"Should Lazaros Petromelidis be imprisoned following his appeal, we would consider him to be a prisoner of conscience and call for his immediate and unconditional release," Amnesty International said. He was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience when he was earlier imprisoned between April and June 1999.

Noting reports of pending changes to the legislation governing military service, the organization urged that these should include amendments to provisions dealing with conscientious objection and alternative service, and to ensure that they are in line with international standards and recommendations.

In particular, the organization is urging that alternative civilian service, which currently is over twice as long as military service, should not be of discriminatory and punitive length; that conscientious objectors should have the right to claim conscientious objector status at any time, both up to and after entering the armed forces; and that the right to perform alternative civilian service never be derogated from, including in time of war.

Background

In 1998 Lazaros Petromelidis, who is aged 40, married and the father of a child, was summoned to do 30 months' civilian service at a Health Centre in Kilkis, some 550 km from his home. He was convicted after refusing to do this service, on the grounds that it was of punitive length. Military service for a man of his age and family circumstances would in fact effectively last four months -- given the right to buy exemption from eight months of a 12 month service -- and would take place near home. Under present legislation, his refusal meant he lost the right to conscientious objection to military service.

And appeal hearings which took place in June 1999 was adjourned after a prosecution witness failed to appear in court. Lazaros Petromelidis also appealed to the State Council which has yet to rule on his case. Despite recommendations made by the Greek Ombudsman, no amendments to Law no 2510/1997 on civilian service have been made as yet.

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