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Greece: Rights of conscientious objectors denied by new laws

Amnesty International today wrote to the Greek authorities criticizing both the new law on conscientious objection passed by the Greek Parliament in June, and a new draft law on Universal Defence shortly to be presented to parliament by the Greek Government.

Law 2510/97, adopted by the Greek Parliament on 5 June, introduces for the first time the right for conscripts who are opposed to the personal use of arms for fundamental reasons of conscience based on religious, philosophical, ideological or moral convictions to claim conscientious objector status and to perform an alternative civilian service.

“We welcome the introduction of this right but the law does not go far enough,” Amnesty International said today. “Many of the measures are punitive and the law fails to recognize that conscientious objectors have the right to develop conscientious objection during military service.”

“About 250 conscientious objectors -- all Jehovah’s Witnesses -- are imprisoned because they have refused to perform military service on religious grounds. These people are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately.”

Amnesty International has numerous criticisms of Law 2510/97: the length of the new alternative civilian service is punitive (42 months compared to 24 months for military service) and its provisions for alternative service can be suspended in case of war. Also, the provisions of the law relating to alternative civilian service do not come into force until January 1998 and conscientious objectors who refuse to perform military service in the meantime still face prison sentences of up to four years.

Another conscientious objector, who is not a Jehovah’s Witness, also faces imminent arrest for refusing, on grounds of conscience, to perform military service. Lazaros Petromelidis, a 37-year-old married man with one child, first declared his conscientious objection to military service in a letter to the military authorities in 1992. On 7 October 1997 he wrote to the Navy Conscription Office, stating that he was prepared to perform alternative civilian service, as provided for under Law 2510/97. However, on Monday of this week police officers visited his home to enforce a warrant for his arrest, issued last December. Lazaros Petromelidis is currently in hiding. Amnesty International is calling on the Greek authorities to suspend the arrest warrant issued.

In its letter to the Greek Government Amnesty International also criticized a new draft law on Universal Defence, shortly to be presented to parliament. According to reports, the new law will make it compulsory for all women aged between 18 and 50, and for all men aged between 18 and 65 who are not currently serving in the armed forces or in the National Guard, to complete a period of training in universal defence units.

The exact duration of the compulsory training is unclear. Certain groups of women, such as those who are pregnant or who have children under the age of 12, are to be exempt. The units will reportedly come under the administration of the General Staff of the Ministry of Defence, and members of units will perform a range of functions, such as responding to natural disasters, guarding vital installations and providing first aid. It is also reported that members of the units, particularly those based in border areas, will be given training in the use of arms.

The new draft legislation reportedly contains no provisions for allowing those people who object to military service on grounds of conscience to register their objection. Failure to report for service will, according to the draft law, be punishable by a period of imprisonment of between six and 12 months, increasing to a maximum of three years in prison in periods of general mobilization, such as has existed in Greece since 1974.

“The Greek authorities should review the provisions of Law 2510/97 and the new draft law on Universal defence with a view to bringing them both into line with international standards and recommendations on the right to conscientious objection,” Amnesty International said.
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