

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN TURKMENISTAN**STATEMENT by the EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES****For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 23 September to 4 October 2013**

The beauty of Turkmenistan is tarnished by serious and persistent violations of fundamental human rights. In particular, Turkmenistan treats harshly conscientious objectors to military service who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities criminally prosecute the alleged "evasion" of military service, sentencing those found guilty by up to 24 months' imprisonment. The law permits the repeated prosecution and imprisonment of conscientious objectors.

Currently, Turkmenistan has imprisoned eight Jehovah's Witnesses as conscientious objectors to military service, five of whom are serving their second term of imprisonment. The most recent conviction and imprisonment took place on 10 July 2013.

Prison authorities repeatedly place these peaceful young men in "punishment cells" for days or weeks on end, where guards beat, humiliate, and deprive them of basic necessities.

Fifteen conscientious objectors who are Jehovah's Witnesses have now filed complaints with the UN Human Rights Committee. Sadly, there have been consequences for having made complaint.

Seven weeks after the Human Rights Committee communicated the first 10 complaints to Turkmenistan (on 7 December 2012), more than 30 police officers raided the family home of complainant Navruz Nasyrlyayev (on 24 January 2013 at 22:00). His parents were entertaining guests, including a young married couple. The police took Mr Nasyrlyayev's father and brother to the police station along with the married couple and two other male guests. The police beat all six persons over their kidneys with plastic bottles filled with water so as not to leave bruising.

The police singled out the married couple for particularly despicable treatment. They first beat the husband in the presence of his wife, and then took the wife into a separate room where they threatened to rape her if she did not sign a statement they had prepared. The statement falsely claimed that Mr Nasyrlyayev's father was holding "illegal" religious meetings in his home. Police tortured one of the other male guests by tying his hands and feet spread eagle with a rope to the bars of a prison cell, keeping him in this position for hours until he passed out from pain. Mr Nasyrlyayev's father and his guests were later charged and convicted of "illegal religious activity."

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully call upon the President of Turkmenistan to respect the right to conscientious objection to military service, to amnesty or pardon the eight imprisoned conscientious objectors, to allow Jehovah's Witnesses official registration in Turkmenistan, and to end the abuses inflicted on the Witnesses merely for exercise of their beliefs.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of Turkmenistan attending the conference in order to promote a constructive dialogue.