

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN SOUTH KOREA

ORAL STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 24 September to 5 October 2012

Since 1915, Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Korea who is an OSCE Partner for Co-operation. They were registered as a legally recognized religion in 1952. The approximately 100,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea appreciate the freedom of worship granted in their country. However, they are oppressed by the unresolved issue of conscientious objection.

Is a solution to this issue possible? It is interesting to note that many young Jehovah's Witnesses would accept to perform a genuine alternative civilian service. This would allow them to serve their country in a dignified manner that respects their conscience. However, in South Korea, no option to military training exists.

What is the consequence of having no option to military training?

- Conscientious objectors to active military service are sentenced to one and a half years of imprisonment. They are released with a criminal record, affecting their future prospects.
- Conscientious objectors to reservist training face repeated trials and fines. They undergo 8 year-long cycles of call-ups, 2 or 3 times a year, and repeated prosecutions. For example, one conscientious objector to reservist training has been prosecuted 37 times and faces two more years of call-ups and trials.

South-Korea holds the sad record for imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses as conscientious objectors: there are currently more than 650. Since 1950, about 17,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea have been sentenced to a combined total of more than 32,000 years for conscientious objection.

What do international bodies say about this sad situation? In March 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Committee condemned South Korea for a third time because of its imprisoning hundreds of conscientious objectors. In its decisions, the Committee reminded South Korea that it was under obligation to put an end to the violation of freedom of conscience.

In the OSCE sphere of influence, most countries have introduced an alternative civilian service option, where applicable. Moreover, the OSCE 1990 Copenhagen Document states in its article 18.4 that the participating States "agree to consider introducing, (...), various forms of alternative service, which are compatible with the reasons for conscientious objection, (...) and of (...) civilian nature, (...) and of a non-punitive nature."

Last year, in its Bayatyan decision rendered by the Grand Chamber, the European Court of Human Rights condemned a member of the Council of Europe for not having introduced an alternative civilian service. This stand was recently confirmed by this Court in its judgments regarding the cases of Yunus Ercep and Feti Demirtaş.

Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea respectfully request the government of their country to pardon the conscientious objectors presently in prison and institute an alternative civilian service that is not under military supervision.

A delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses is ready to meet with representatives of South Korea attending the present conference in order to clarify any misunderstanding and to promote a constructive dialogue.