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ARMENIA: No let-up in Jehovah's Witness sentences

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

With ten Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors sentenced to terms of between one and two years since the new Criminal Code came into force on 1 August and another expecting to be tried around 25 October, the special representative in Armenia of the Council of Europe secretary general says such continuing sentencing violates Armenia's commitments to end the practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors. "All the conscientious objectors should have been freed in line with Armenia's commitments back in January 2001, when it joined the Council of Europe," Natalia Voutova told Forum 18 News Service. But Narine Nikolian, Armenia's deputy representative to the Council of Europe, denied this, insisting to Forum 18 that no-one can be released from what she claimed is their constitutional obligation until a new alternative service law is adopted.

Despite Armenia's commitments under the Council of Europe to free all conscientious objectors to military service, ten more Jehovah's Witness young men have been sentenced to terms of between one and two years under the new Criminal Code, which came into force on 1 August. Nine of the ten are now in labour camps, bringing to twenty-four the number of imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses. "All the conscientious objectors should have been freed in line with Armenia's commitments back in January 2001, when it joined the Council of Europe," Natalia Voutova, special representative in Armenia of the Council of Europe secretary general, told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Yerevan on 7 October. "We are aware that conscientious objectors are now being imprisoned under the new criminal code." She said the Council of Europe will keep up the pressure on Armenia for it to abide by its commitments.

Krzysztof Zyman of the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Human Rights is equally clear. "The Armenian government's practice of continuing to imprison conscientious objectors is a violation of the commitments to the Council of Europe Armenia took on when it joined in January 2001," he told Forum 18 from Strasbourg on 8 October.

However, Narine Nikolian, Armenia's deputy representative to the Council of Europe, vigorously denied this. "There were several amnesties and those who were imprisoned when Armenia joined were pardoned and freed," she told Forum 18 from Strasbourg on 7 October. "Those in prison now are different people."

She insisted that Armenia's constitution, which declares in Article 47 "Every citizen shall participate in the defence of the Republic of Armenia in a manner prescribed by law", currently requires young Armenian men to conduct military service and overrides any international commitment. She maintained that the continued sentencing of conscientious objectors cannot end until a new alternative service law is adopted. Parliament has just adopted such a law in a text that does not meet Council of Europe recommendations.

The ten new Jehovah's Witness prisoners were sentenced under Article 327, part 1, of the new criminal code which declares: "Evading a recurring call to emergency military service, or educational or military training, without a legal basis for being relieved of this service, shall incur a fine in the amount of 300 to 500 minimum [monthly] wages or arrest for up to two months or imprisonment for up to two years."

First to be sentenced under the new article was Edgar Saroyan on 7 August, who received a two year sentence and is now in labour camp at Kosh near the town of Ashtarak. In quick succession came the sentencing of David Sahakyan (2 years), Artur Torosyan (1.5 years), Jora Keropyan (2 years), Mikael Manvelyan (2 years), Pavel Sarkisyan (1.5 years), Artur Kocharyan (1 year), Hracha Sarkisyan (1 year) and Mihran Unanyan (1.5 years). The most recent trial was of Andranik Mavetsyan, sentenced on 24 September to one year's imprisonment and now in labour camp at Nubarashen near Yerevan. While nine of the new prisoners are being held in labour camps, Kocharyan has not been imprisoned, but has been required to sign an undertaking not to leave his home.

These new prisoners join thirteen who are still serving sentences for refusing military service on religious grounds under the old criminal code. A further three - Artyom Kazaryan, Kevork Chatyan and Ishkhan Namunts – are awaiting trial. Rustam Khachatryan, a lawyer for the Jehovah's Witnesses, told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 9 October that judge Nelli Kasparyan of Abovian regional court had said two days earlier that Namunts' trial is due to take place sometime around 25 or 27 October.

There are also seven other Jehovah's Witnesses who have been released early from their prison sentences but who are still under

arrest in their homes. They have to report regularly to the local police and cannot leave their home town without permission until the end of their sentences.

Official figures put the number of conscientious objectors sentenced in the last three years at 150, the majority of them Jehovah's Witnesses.

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