

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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15th May: International CO Day - Greece misses another opportunity to celebrate

Six years after the introduction of Law 2510/97, which for the first time offered the possibility of alternative civilian service in Greece, and despite a series of declarations by the authorities promising its improvement, Amnesty International believes that the alternative civilian service, both in law and in practice, continues to be of a punitive nature and to be biased against conscientious objectors. The organization calls for a reform of this service on the basis of international standards and for an end to the persecution of conscientious objectors.

On the occasion of the International Day for Conscientious Objection, Amnesty International expresses its deep concerns regarding the recommendations given by the Special Committee that examines the applications of the individuals who wish to be granted 'conscientious objector' status. Specifically, this committee has suggested the blanket rejection of applications of conscientious objectors on the basis of ideological grounds, such as that of Dimitris Dimas, who had the committee's rejection recommendation overruled by the State Council on 30 December 2002, after appealing against the rejection of his application for conscientious objector status.

Amnesty International calls for a re-evaluation of the Committee's operation in general and urges for an alternative civilian service of a purely civilian nature, completely out of the authority of the Ministry of Defence, including the examinations of the applications for conscientious objectors. According to the international standards and recommendations, the entire institution of alternative service should have a completely civilian character, so, if a committee is provided in order to examine the applications, it should have no military members and not to report to military authorities.

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed its concern that Law 2510/97 lacks safeguards in the event of arbitrary or subjective recommendations made by the Committee. In the case of Dimitris Dimas, the Committee recommended against his application and the Minister of Defence indeed rejected his application on 10 August 2001 because the claimant "did not declare that he belongs to a known belief dogma (religious, political, moral or generally ideological) that opposes to military service, and did not present his views about why he opposes military service convincingly as part of a general outlook on life and did not present evidence of activities and lifestyle characteristically led by ideological convictions that would prevent him from carrying out his military duties".

In another recent case, conscientious objector Kyriacos Kapidis claimed objection on ideological grounds. His application to perform alternative civilian service was similarly rejected on 5 April 2004 because the applicant "did not present his views about why he opposes military service convincingly as part of a general outlook on life and did not present evidence of activities and lifestyle characteristically led

by ideological convictions that would prevent him from carrying out his military duties".

Background information

Amnesty International's concerns are described in detail in the report entitled *Greece: To be in the army or choosing not to be: the continuous harassment of conscientious objectors* (AI Index EUR 25/003/2003 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur250032003>).

In brief, the organization urges the Greek authorities to amend Law 2510/97 in order to ensure that:

- alternative civilian service is not of discriminatory and punitive length;
- it falls under entirely civilian authority (including in the examinations of applications for conscientious objectors);
- conscientious objectors have the right to claim conscientious objector status at any time, both up to and after entering the armed forces;
- the right to perform alternative civilian service can never be derogated from, including in time of war;
- conscientious objectors who carry out trade unionist activities or participate in a strike during their alternative service do not have their right to alternative civilian service or unarmed military service revoked;
- conscientious objectors who have legal proceeding pending against them will have their full civil and personal rights recovered, including that of travel outside the country, the right to a passport and identity card, and the right to vote.

Similar concerns have also been raised by the Greek Ombudsman and the Greek National Commission for Human Rights.