

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

For Immediate Release

March 15, 2007

Where will Turkey stand on freedom of religion?

Feti Demirtaş is a 25-year-old citizen of the Republic of Turkey who has served his ninth prison sentence within a period of two years. His “crime”? Feti’s Bible-trained conscience will not allow him to join the military. He explains, “I am a sincere conscientious objector and base my stand in part on Isaiah 2:4, which says not to learn war anymore.”

Feti is a member of the Christian congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses and his conscience will, on the other hand, allow him to participate in genuine alternative civilian service, if any such legal arrangement existed. He has consistently and respectfully made this clear to the appropriate authorities. But Turkey does not recognize conscientious objection to military service and has no legal provision for alternative service. Applications for exemption as conscientious objectors are simply not processed. Instead, the military courts have told Feti that “Turkey, Belarus, and Azerbaijan are the countries in Europe not acknowledging conscientious objection.”

Feti has endured verbal abuse, slaps in the face, kicks in the head and body, aggressive intimidation, psychiatric evaluations, and repeated arrests and imprisonments. One captain told Feti: “Pray not to be assigned to my military base, since I will make you lead a dog’s life. I will force you to perform military service.” Another told him: “Leave Turkey if you do not want to be in the military.”

Feti is one of 14 young men who are Jehovah’s Witnesses facing this issue. Another, Yunus Erçep, continues to experience ongoing and relentless prosecutions and punishments. Through his 10-year ordeal, Yunus has endured verbal and physical harassment, 11 days in a psychiatric hospital for “religious paranoia,” fines and five months in prison. To date, Yunus has been called up 24 times for military service and has been prosecuted 21 times.

Court applications for both Feti and Yunus have been filed with the European Court of Human Rights. These men are not making any type of political statement by their filing with the Court, they have merely exhausted all local remedies and recognize this treatment as a violation of their freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Since 1931, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been present in Turkey. Today, there are some 3,000 members and associates. Although not officially registered as a legal entity, Jehovah’s Witnesses have de facto recognition as a religion in Turkey as a result of open communication with officials as well as various court rulings in their favor. Recent efforts by Jehovah’s Witnesses to obtain legal recognition in the country have met with success by local court decisions. However, the government has appealed the decision and the case is pending with the Supreme Court in Ankara.

Turkey is a country at a crossroads. What recognized freedoms will it protect? What will its citizens have a right to expect?

Contacts:

In Turkey: Ercument Kadim, telephone +90 533 630 02 12

In Belgium: Luca Toffoli, telephone +32 (0) 475 58 10 36 or + 32 (0)2 782 00 15

In the United States: James Andrik, telephone (845) 306-0711