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ARMENIA: New wave of Jehovah's Witness sentences

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Five young Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been imprisoned for refusing military service so far in March, the largest number in a single month since last October and in continuing defiance of Armenia's commitment to the Council of Europe to end imprisonment of conscientious objectors. One, Arman Agazaryan, a 28-year-old dentist, is the only breadwinner in his extended family of six, his lawyer Rustam Khachatryan told Forum 18 News Service. Khachatryan also complains of the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses who have opted for the alternative military service, saying they remain under military control, have to serve far longer than those in the army and are banned from joining their fellow Jehovah's Witnesses for worship. There is no civilian alternative service.

In the biggest wave of sentences of Jehovah's Witnesses in Armenia since last October, at least five young men have been handed prison terms of up to two years since the beginning of March, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. All five refused to serve in the army or do the alternative military service, which they argue is not the genuine civilian alternative which Armenia is committed to provide. Among them is a 28-year-old dentist from the capital Yerevan, Arman Agazaryan, who was called up in the wake of a defence ministry order last November that doctors who had previously been exempted from serving in the army after studying medicine at the academy can now be drafted up to the age of 35. "He was deliberately targeted for conscription and sentenced because he is a Jehovah's Witness," his lawyer Rustam Khachatryan told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 18 March. "No other dentists have been taken."

After Agazaryan refused to be drafted into the army on grounds of religious conscience, he was arrested on 23 December 2004 and was tried in Yerevan in mid-March, receiving a prison sentence of one and a half years. "Agazaryan supported his wife, his seven-year old son, his parents and his wife's mother on his income," Khachatryan told Forum 18. "Now they have lost their only breadwinner to prison." He is being held in Nubarashen prison, where most other Jehovah's Witness prisoners are incarcerated.

Like all but one of the current prisoners, Agazaryan was sentenced under Article 327 part I of the criminal code, which reads: "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."

Sergei Hovhanissyan was sentenced to one and a half years in prison in early March and is now held at Nubarashen. Gevork Manukyan was sentenced to two years' imprisonment on 16 March and is now in Nubarashen. Arsen Gasparyan was sentenced in the town of Vedi in Ararat region to one and a half years in prison on 17 March. He too is imprisoned at Nubarashen. Also sentenced to two years' imprisonment in March was Ashot Torgomyan.

Armenia last year introduced the alternative military service of three and a half years' duration (compared to two years' military service) under defence ministry control, which became available from 1 July. The government insisted that this met its commitment made to the Council of Europe when it joined to introduce a civilian service of non-punitive length by January 2004. Its refusal to meet its obligations to provide a non-punitive civilian service have repeatedly been condemned by officials of the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and human rights groups (see F18News 19 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=434).

Some Jehovah's Witnesses have been prepared to do the alternative service, believing that although it was not ideal the actual work handed to those doing it was non-military and therefore did not violate their pacifist beliefs. However, Khachatryan insists that all but one of the 18 Jehovah's Witnesses who opted for this alternative service are "discontented". "They remain under military control - which means it is not civilian service, the term of three and a half years is not in line with European norms and while serving all but one of them have been banned from attending Jehovah's Witness meetings," he told Forum 18. "It's worse than the army."

He said that as lawyer to four of the young men carrying out their alternative service at a mental hospital in Yerevan, he had gone to see the hospital head, Karapetyan, and the chief doctor Aleksanyan. "They told me categorically the four were doing military service under the control of the defence ministry," Khachatryan told Forum 18. "Dr Aleksanyan told me they wouldn't be allowing the men to have a quiet life."

Khachatryan complained that the four were allowed no contact with their fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, and were banned from preaching their faith or meeting for worship. Nor are they granted any holiday.

Although the four are not being given military training, they must wear special dark blue alternative service uniforms. "By law they shouldn't be looking after the mentally ill at all, as special training for this should be given," he added. "They've been given no training."

Meanwhile, two Jehovah's Witnesses - Hovhannes and Arsen (last names unknown) were beaten on the street by the deputy police chief of the southern town of Megri, Khachatryan also told Forum 18. While the two were talking on the street, a car pulled up and out got the deputy police chief and two other men, who beat the Jehovah's Witnesses. They then left. Shortly afterwards, police officers returned and took the pair to the police station, where they were held for an hour and again beaten before being freed.

Khachatryan said the two were lodging complaints to the minister of the interior and the prosecutor's office.

The Jehovah's Witnesses - who claim that up to 15,000 people attend their meetings in Armenia - have faced widespread official and popular opposition to their activity over the past decade. Last October, after a nine-year battle, the group finally managed to get state registration (see F18News 12 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=430).

A printer-friendly map of Armenia is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=armeni>

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