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ARMENIA: Will Armenia now fulfil all its human rights commitments?

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

After repeated refusals over a nine-year period, the Jehovah's Witness community has finally received state registration. Hratch Keshishian, a Jehovah's Witness leader, told Forum 18 News Service that "when they phoned us from the state registry to tell us that registration had been issued I didn't believe them." But it is not known what impact this will have on the Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison terms for refusing military service, thus breaking Armenia's commitments to the Council of Europe. Keshishian told Forum 18 that freedom to practise their faith as a religious community is now the Jehovah's Witnesses' aim, as "registration in itself doesn't resolve all our problems." For example, under Armenia's religion law, but against international human rights obligations, only the Armenian Apostolic Church is legally permitted to conduct missionary activity.

After a nine-year battle and repeated refusals, Armenia's Jehovah's Witness community has finally received state registration. "We only got the certificate yesterday," Hratch Keshishian, a Jehovah's Witness leader, told Forum 18 News Service from the Armenian capital Yerevan today (12 October). "When they phoned us from the state registry to tell us that registration had been issued I didn't believe them." Describing this as "a great joy", Keshishian said he did not know what impact the move would have on the Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison terms for refusing military service.

The registration certificate, issued by the state registry of legal entities on 8 October and signed by the deputy justice minister Tigran Mukuchyan, came in response to the Jehovah's Witnesses' fourteenth application, lodged on 9 September. Keshishian said the registration covers the Jehovah's Witnesses' activity across the whole of the country. All earlier applications had been rejected on various grounds, including that the group's beliefs or practices violated the law (see F18News 3 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=384). The main reason for rejecting one application earlier this year was that the Jehovah's Witnesses had forgotten to indicate the number of copies they were filing.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, who first applied for state registration in Armenia in 1995, were the only significant religious community to have been denied such registration. Without this they were not allowed to print or import religious literature, rent places for meetings, hold conventions or build places of worship, Kingdom Halls.

Registering the Jehovah's Witnesses was a key demand of the Council of Europe, although Keshishian insists that freedom to practise their faith as a religious community is the Jehovah's Witnesses' aim. "Registration in itself doesn't resolve all our problems," he told Forum 18. Under Armenia's 1997 religion law, even religious communities with registration are not allowed to conduct missionary activity (Article 17 of the law gives the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church a monopoly on missionary activity).

Keshishian identified the Jehovah's Witnesses current key aims as acquiring religious literature legally and resolving the problem of their refusal to perform military service on grounds of conscience. He told Forum 18 that it is "too early" for them to think about building Kingdom Halls across the country, not least because of money. "This is a question for the future." He reported that the "nearly 9,000" Jehovah's Witnesses have been meeting in small groups in private homes "in nearly all parts of the country".

Despite a new law on alternative military service, which came into force on 1 July, the Jehovah's Witnesses remain unhappy. The alternative service being offered is not in line with Council of Europe standards as it is far longer than military service and is not genuinely non-military as conscripts remain under the authority of the Ministry of Defence (see F18News 3 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=384).

As of 24 September, eight male Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison terms of between one and two years for refusing military service, while a further five were arrested and awaiting trial. Another three have had to sign undertakings not to leave their home as they await trial. On 29 March, Stepan Epremyan was sentenced to a fine of 300,000 drams (3,868 Norwegian kroner, 471 Euros or 580 US dollars) for refusing military service.

Keshishian said it was their hope that the imprisoned conscientious objectors would now be freed from labour camps and charges dropped against those awaiting trial. "Our young men are ready to do an alternative civilian service, but unfortunately that doesn't

yet exist," he told Forum 18. "The next call-up begins in November, and we don't know what will happen then."

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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