



Member of the European Parliament

1 March 2013

Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov
President of the Republic of Turkmenistan
Presidential Palace
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan 744000
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Dear Mr President,

As Members of the European Parliament, we write to express our deep concern regarding the continued detention of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan, and urge you to facilitate their immediate release.

As you may be aware, adherents to the Jehovah's Witness religion are prevented by their faith from joining the military, even in countries that have adopted compulsory military service. While alternative, non-military service would allow members of such religious traditions to meet both their religious and civic obligations, it is our understanding that such alternative service is not available in Turkmenistan. As such, Jehovah's Witnesses who are unable to join the military because of their faith face prosecution, and even the possibility of imprisonment, by your government. In addition to individuals given suspended sentences, at least 17 Jehovah's Witnesses in the last five years have been imprisoned for refusing military service, and eight are currently serving prison terms of up to two years.

After visiting Ashgabat in 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief expressed her concern regarding the criminalization of conscientious objection and noted that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Turkmenistan is a party, encompasses the right to alternative, non-military service. Further, in March 2012, the UN Human Rights Committee, the body tasked with interpreting and monitoring implementation of the ICCPR, echoed the Special Rapporteur's concerns and called on your government adopt clear protections for the right to conscientious objection, cease its prosecution of conscientious objectors, and release those individuals serving prison sentences.

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, and we reiterate the concerns expressed by the Special Rapporteur and UN Human Rights Committee. In light of Turkmenistan's recent Flag Day celebrations, we believe that pardoning those Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for refusing military service would be an important step towards your government's full recognition of the basic right to freedom of religion and belief.

Sincerely,

Charles Tannock MEP (ECR, UK)

Thijs Berman MEP (S&D, Netherlands)

Adam Bielan MEP (ECR, Poland)

Elmar Brok MEP (EPP, Germany)

Cornelis de Jong MEP (EUL/NGL, Netherlands)

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