

Jehovah's Witnesses and Alternative Civilian Service



Jehovah's Witnesses and Alternative Civilian Service

“Nation will not lift up sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore.”

—*Isaiah 2:4*



One of Jehovah's Witnesses performing alternative civilian service in Taichung Veterans General Hospital, Taiwan

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

Conscientious objection to military service is internationally recognized and protected as a fundamental human right. Preeminent international human rights courts have ruled that the right to conscientious objection to military service is inherent in the basic right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The vast majority of countries provide an alternative form of national service that is civilian in nature or grant total exemption from military service.

In all the warfare and massacres seen in recent decades—from Bosnia to Rwanda, from Vietnam to the Middle East—the neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses is well-known. For their refusal to bear arms, thousands of Witnesses have suffered lengthy prison terms.

In matters involving politics, the Witnesses follow Jesus' example and consider themselves as “no part of the world.” (John 17:16) They are strictly neutral and do not get involved in governmental affairs.

During World War II, Jehovah's Witnesses in all nations remained politically neutral. As a people, they were made the object of an extermination order by the Nazi regime, in part because of their peaceful refusal to support Hitler's war effort.

ALTERNATIVE CIVILIAN SERVICE

Jehovah's Witnesses apply the Bible's admonition to “beat their swords into plowshares” and not to “learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4) They follow Jesus' command: “‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:39) Jehovah's Witnesses are grateful when governments provide an alternative civilian service program that allows them to serve their community in a way that does not conflict with their Bible-trained conscience. Each individual decides which types of service he can personally perform in good conscience.

In 2012, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published the document “Conscientious Objection to Military Service” as a guide for officials. It presents three key criteria for genuine alternative civilian service: (1) work assignments should be compatible with the beliefs on which the conscientious objection is based, (2) it should be outside the military sphere and not under military control, and (3) it must not be punitive in nature.



Witnesses in alternative civilian service cleaned and beautified a park in the center of Yerevan, Armenia

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF ALTERNATIVE CIVILIAN SERVICE

Government authorities have expressed appreciation for the willing spirit and the valuable work performed in alternative civilian service programs:

- **Taiwan:** “Alternative service benefits the country and the community in many ways. . . . Religious people often have a good spirit in serving their community. . . . I find that they [Jehovah’s Witnesses] serve with much enthusiasm because this activity is really in line with their own religious beliefs.”—Mr. Kou-Enn Lin, director general of the National Conscription Agency of Taiwan
- **Greece:** “They [Jehovah’s Witnesses] see it as a ‘privilege’ to be able to perform civilian service. . . . Their industriousness is unprecedented. Their presence upgrades the operation of the Medical Institution because they are young people that are energetically getting down to work and are going to work for an extended period of time.”
—Melachrini Martidou (*Chronos*, newspaper [Komotini, Greece])
- **Spain:** “It [alternative civilian service] provided notable benefits both to conscientious objectors as well as society in general, serving to increase the levels of sensitivity and solidarity of the conscientious objector. . . . As they were obliged to do something, many preferred to do something that was socially useful.”
—*La objeción de conciencia y la prestación social sustitutoria en España* (English translation: *Conscientious Objection and Alternative Social Service in Spain*), Ministry of Justice of Spain

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS JURISPRUDENCE

United Nations Human Rights Committee

“The right to conscientious objection to military service inheres in the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It entitles any individual to an exemption from compulsory military service if this cannot be reconciled with that individual’s religion or beliefs.”

—Min-Kyu Jeong et al v.
The Republic of Korea, 2011

European Court of Human Rights

“The Court . . . considers that opposition to military service, where it is motivated by a serious and insurmountable conflict between the obligation to serve in the army and a person’s conscience or his deeply and genuinely held religious or other beliefs, constitutes a conviction or belief of sufficient cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance to attract the guarantees of Article 9 [of the European Convention on Human Rights].”

“The applicant in the present case is a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. . . . [T]he applicant’s objection to military service was motivated by his religious beliefs, which were genuinely held and were in serious and insurmountable conflict with his obligation to perform military service.”

—Bayatyan v. Armenia, 2011

“The Court considers that the right to conscientious objection guaranteed by Article 9 of the Convention would be illusory if a State were allowed to organise and implement its system of alternative service in a way that would fail to offer—whether in law or in practice—an alternative to military service of a genuinely civilian nature and one which was not deterrent or punitive in character.”

—Adyan and Others v. Armenia, 2017





Three young Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned for more than 26 years for their conscientious objection to military service. They expressed their desire to serve the community

LEGAL PROVISIONS

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):

- Article 18.1: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

The following international and regional human rights instruments outline similar provisions:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18
- The American Convention on Human Rights, Article 12
- The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Article 9
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, Article 8
- The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, Article 22



One of Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea, refusing to be enlisted for the military in the 1980's. Jehovah's Witnesses are willing to serve the community and perform alternative civilian service, free from military control