

France: Ending the imprisonment of conscientious objectors to military service (1997)



In 1992, between 700 and 1,000 conscientious objectors to military service were routinely sentenced to one year in prison in France. Most of them were Jehovah's Witnesses.

HRWF met with a number of prison visitors who provide spiritual assistance to detained Jehovah's Witnesses. They agreed to discreetly interview the imprisoned conscientious objectors about their detention conditions by using a questionnaire based on UN standards. In all, 43 prisons were covered by the survey. A 32-page report was published in 1993 with the findings. It also proposed a few recommendations drafted by French lawyers who were involved in the project. One

of the recommendations was the revision of Article L.51 of the national military service and Article 447 of the code of military justice.

In February 1995, under Defence Minister Léotard, a form of alternative civilian service was set up that complied with the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses. According to a ministerial circular, Jehovah's Witnesses could apply for an assignment at a social institution or a hospital up to eight days before their call-up. In the event of war, they were assured that they would never be used in any institutions that would directly involve them in military operations. These new conditions made it possible for Jehovah's Witnesses in France to perform alternative civilian service in conformity with their beliefs. In 1996, during President Chirac's term of office, conscription was completely abolished and replaced by a professional.

In 1996, HRWF praised the decision of President Chirac in a special issue of its magazine.



HRWF press conference with two lawyers in Paris in 1993 about the right to conscientious objection to military service (© HRWF)