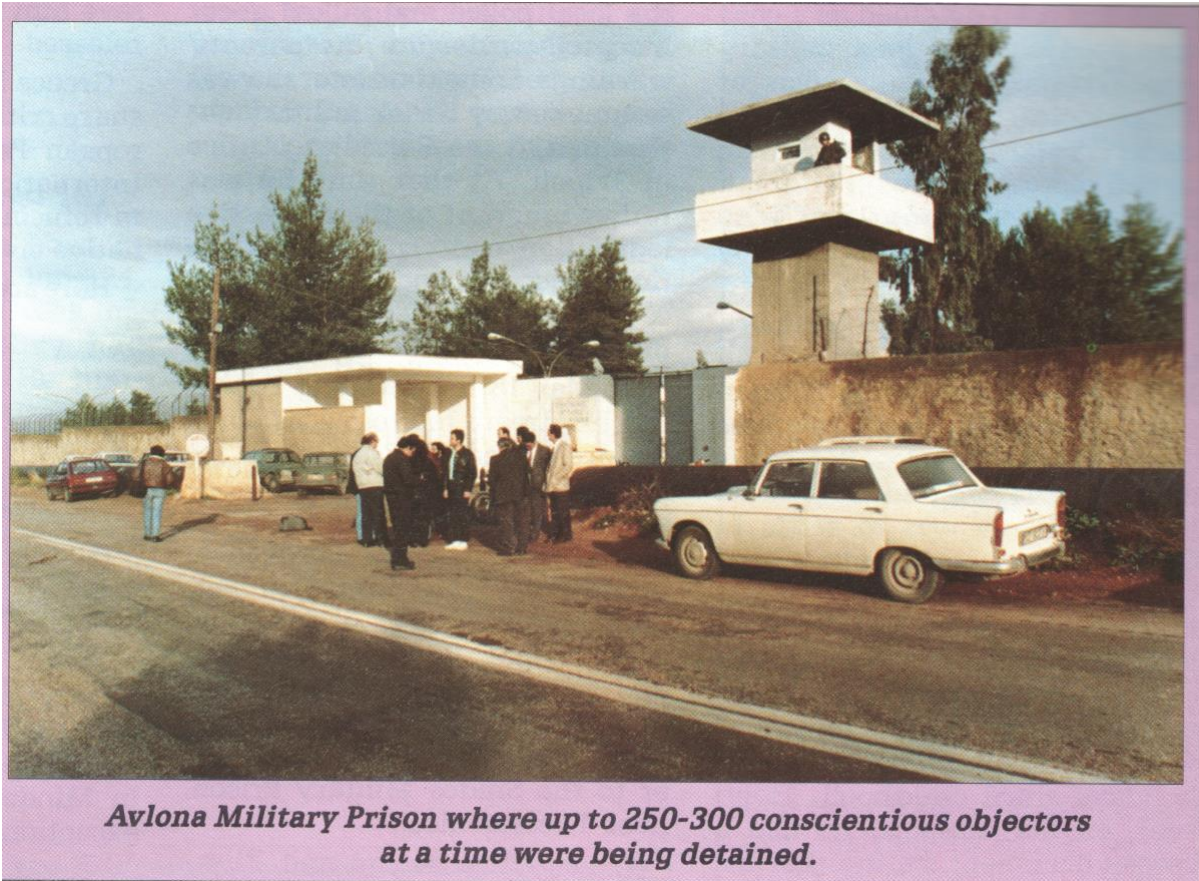


## **Greece: The creation of civilian service for conscientious objectors to military service (1997)**



*HRWF delegation visiting Avlona Prison in 1992 (© HRWF)*

**In 1949, two Jehovah's Witnesses were executed in Greece for refusing to serve in the army due to their religious beliefs. Forty others were sentenced to death but there were no subsequent executions. Under the Regime of the Colonels (1967-1974), many were imprisoned for five to ten years. After the dictatorship collapsed, a newly elected democratic government was established, but Jehovah's Witnesses continued to be sentenced to prison for conscientious objection. In fact, from 1940 to 1994, 2,728 Jehovah's Witnesses were given sentences totalling 10,050 years in prison.**

Greece became a member of the European Union in 1981. In 1990, Greek Jehovah's Witnesses asked HRWF for assistance. At that time, around 400 Jehovah's Witnesses were serving two years in military prisons to be followed by two years in agricultural prisons. HRWF organised several fact-finding missions in such prisons with members of the European Parliament. HRWF published extensive reports

documenting this human rights violation and advocated for the creation of an alternative civilian service. Additionally, HRWF organised conferences at the European Parliament to raise awareness.

The first victory was the creation of a specific prison for Jehovah's Witnesses in Sindos (near Thessaloniki) under the Ministry of Defense in 1994: military barracks converted into a detention place. HRWF's director was invited to the official opening. While this was as a positive step, HRWF continued to advocate for an alternative to military service. Finally, three years later, conscientious objection to military service was decriminalised and Greek authorities passed a law creating an option for civilian service of non-punitive duration.