

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Korea government promises to adopt alternative service system for conscientious objectors

SEOUL—The South Korea government has announced a program to give conscientious objectors an opportunity to participate in alternative civilian service. The program stipulates three years of civilian service that is not connected with the military in any way. Changes in legislation will first be needed in order to implement the program that was announced on September 18, 2007.

This development is one step toward solving the problem that thousands of young men in Korea have faced throughout the past 68 years. Since the establishment of the Republic of Korea, conscientious objectors had no choice but to be imprisoned as criminals.

Jeong, Woon-young, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Korea, commented on the program: "I rejoice at this progress, along with more than 12,000 others who have endured being penalized as criminals for our conscientious stand. We now eagerly await the speedy implementation of legislation." At present, 803 Jehovah's Witnesses are in prison and 90 are on trial.

The UN Human Rights Committee had already shown Korea to be in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Furthermore, after reviewing the cases of two conscientious objectors who had served their prison term, the committee recommended that Korea compensate the two men. It is hoped that the Korean legislature will enact laws in harmony with Article 6 of Korea's Constitution, which obliges Korea to observe international treaties.

Jeong remains cautiously optimistic: "Once legislation is implemented, Korea could keep pace with other countries that protect freedom of religion and conscience. But we see this decision to make civilian service available as an excellent opportunity for all citizens to love their neighbors as themselves."

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