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ARMENIA: Religious conscientious objector forcibly taken to Nagorno-Karabakh

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Armen Grigoryan, a religious conscientious objector who is seriously contemplating becoming a Jehovah's Witness, has been forcibly taken by the Armenian authorities from Armenia to a military unit in Nagorno-Karabakh, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After he was beaten up, Grigoryan was forced to stand in his underwear in front of about 1,800 soldiers to tell them why he refused to do military service. "He told everyone present that his rejection was based on his religious beliefs and his study of the Bible," his father told Forum 18. This is the first instance known to Forum 18 of an Armenian religious conscientious objector being forcibly taken to a military unit in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia has repeatedly broken its promises to the Council of Europe on the treatment of conscientious objectors. Grigoryan has now escaped from the military and has written to the Armenian authorities from his hiding place, to say that he is prepared to do alternative civilian service.

An eighteen-year-old Armenian citizen, Armen Grigoryan - who is from a Jehovah's Witness family, has attended their meetings and is seriously contemplating baptism as a Jehovah's Witness - was summoned to the military recruitment office in the Armenian capital Yerevan under a pretext on 21 June 2004. Within 24 hours and against his will he had been taken out of Armenia and transferred to a military unit across the border in Nagorno-Karabakh.

On refusing to swear the military oath and sing the national anthem for religious reasons at the second regiment base in Martuni region of eastern Karabakh, his father Hovhanes Grigoryan told Forum 18 from Yerevan on 5 January, Armen Grigoryan was beaten by Lieutenant Shakaryan (first name unknown) and Captain Hovhanes Danielyan. With the help of his father, Grigoryan wrote to several government departments and human rights organisations but "it worsened his situation".

Lieutenant-General Vladik Khachatryan ordered that legal proceedings be instituted against Grigoryan. At the instigation of the prosecutor's assistant, he was stripped and forced to stand in his underwear in front of about 1,800 soldiers in the unit to tell them why he refused to do military service. "He told everyone present that his rejection was based on his religious beliefs and his study of the Bible," Hovhanes Grigoryan told Forum 18. "He explained that he had asked to be provided with civilian alternative service. Then he was offered military alternative service which he rejected."

In the presence of the unit commander, Grigoryan again wrote an application for civilian alternative service to Armenia's ombudsperson, Larisa Alaverdyan. Alaverdyan has in the past denied to Forum 18 that jailing Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors breaks Armenia's Council of Europe and OSCE commitments, and has blamed Jehovah's Witnesses for the problems they face from the Armenian government (see F18News 3 August 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=384).

After a month Armen Grigoryan was briefly hospitalised with gastritis, but after a visit from an official of the procuracy escaped from his military unit in Karabakh on 25 August and is now being hunted. His father, whose other son spent several years in prison in Armenia for refusing military service on grounds of religious conscience, told Forum 18 that Armen Grigoryan has written to the Armenian authorities from his hiding place to say he is prepared to do alternative civilian service.

A Baptist young man from Nagorno-Karabakh, Gagik Mirzoyan, who also refused because of his faith to serve in the Nagorno-Karabakh armed forces, was also beaten up, and is currently been held in an unknown location by the authorities. Relatives have been denied information about his location and access to him, and Ministry would only tell Forum 18 that he "is still alive." (See F18News 6 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=483).

Nagorno-Karabakh's deputy foreign minister Masis Mailyan told Forum 18, from Stepanakert on 5 January, that the issue of why Grigoryan was forcibly transferred against his will from Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh was an issue for the Armenian authorities. As for the maltreatment in the unit in Karabakh, Mailyan said he had no information.

Armenia has promised the Council of Europe that it will introduce alternative civilian service and free religious prisoners of conscience imprisoned for conscientious objection, but has repeatedly broken these promises (see F18News 19 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=434). Deputy foreign minister Mailyan insisted to Forum 18 that "laws on subjects

that form part of Armenia's obligations under the Council of Europe also extend to the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic." Mailyan however, also claimed that the Karabakh armed forces are under local control, not under the control of Armenia (see F18News 6 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=483).

Nagorno-Karabakh has been under martial law since 1992, and imposes restrictions on civil liberties, including banning the activity of "religious sects and unregistered organisations", banning demonstrations and imposing media censorship. Officials claim that only "registered organisations" can hold meetings, and the only religious community to have registration is the Armenian Apostolic Church - effectively Karabakh's state church. Baptists have faced continued harassment from the authorities but although other communities - including Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses - have faced problems, pressures have generally eased in recent years.

A printer-friendly map of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is

available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=azerba> within the map titled 'Azerbaijan'.

A printer-friendly map of Armenia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=armeni>

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