

Amnesty International: conscientious objector released in Belarus



Amnesty International has welcomed the release of Yevgeny Yakovenko, a conscientious objector who had been sentenced to one year in prison for “evading military service”. He was released under an amnesty marking the 65th anniversary of the end of the World War II.

Earlier this year two other conscientious objectors have been acquitted. In what appears to be a positive trend Belarusian conscientious objector Ivan Mikhailau has been acquitted of the charge of “evasion of conscription measures.” On 4 May, Ivan Mikhailau’s case was heard for a second time by Minsk Regional Court and he was found to be not guilty. Amnesty International had been vocal on his case. This was followed on 31 May by another acquittal of a conscientious objector. Dzmitry Smyk, a Jehovah’s Witness who had been charged with avoiding mandatory military service was acquitted by central court in the Belarusian city of Homel. The judge commented: “Smyk’s actions do not constitute a crime.”

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*Belarus frees conscientious objector**

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Amnesty International has welcomed the release of a conscientious objector in Belarus who had been sentenced to one year in prison for “evading military service”.

Yevgeny Yakovenko, who refuses to carry arms because of his

pacifist convictions, was amnestied by a panel of judges in the south-eastern city of Gomel on 23 July.

He was released under an amnesty marking the 65th anniversary of the end of the second world war.

He has repeatedly requested that he be allowed to perform an alternative military service.

“Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release is a positive step but there is still no alternative civilian service in Belarus, which means that he may be summoned to perform military service again,” said Heather McGill, Amnesty International’s researcher on Belarus.

“The authorities must ensure that Yevgeny Yakovenko’s right to conscientious objection is observed and that he is not prosecuted again for his beliefs.”

Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release comes after two other conscientious objectors, Ivan Mikhailau and Dzmitry Smyk, were freed in May.

Both men had refused to carry arms on religious grounds and had asked to perform an alternative civilian service.

Yevgeny Yakovenko, a member of opposition party the Belarusian Christian Democracy, was charged with “evading military service” on 20 January 2010.

He was found guilty by the Central District Court in Gomel on 4 June.

On 10 June Amnesty International sent a letter to the Prosecutor General in Belarus, Grigory Alekseevich, calling for Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release.

The Constitution of Belarus allows for the possibility of exemption from military service and for the substitution of military service by an alternative service to be determined

by the law.

However, the laws allowing for an alternative civilian service have not yet been passed which means that many young men continue to be prosecuted.

“The Belarusian authorities must absolve all conscientious objectors from military service and provide them with a genuine civilian alternative,” said Heather McGill.

The right to refuse to perform military service for reasons of conscience is inherent in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.