



P R E S S R E L E A S E

Conscientious objectors and peace activists from around Europe in the UN buffer zone between the two parts of Nicosia, Cyprus

Brussels, 10 November 2017

The 2017 General Assembly of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (EBCO) was held on 4th November in the Cyprus Community Media Centre (CCMC) in the UN buffer zone between the two parts of Nicosia, the last divided capital in Europe, in Cyprus.

"We chose this place to highlight the demand for peace and reconciliation, with demilitarization of the island and full respect of the human rights, including the right to conscientious objection to military service. Conscientious objectors are symbolically the buffer zone for peace", EBCO President Friedhelm Schneider stated.



EBCO's General Assembly 2017, 04/11/2017, CCMC, UN buffer zone Nicosia, Cyprus

The previous day, in the House for Co-operation, also in the buffer zone, EBCO hosted a press conference and a public discussion. EBCO expresses its thanks to the Cyprus Tourism Organisation, whose sponsorship made these events possible.

Derek Brett, editor of EBCO's Annual Report on Conscientious Objection to Military Service in Europe 2017, presented the key findings of the report, which will be published on December 10th, International Human Rights Day, and stated that *"Efforts to recognize the rights of conscientious objectors have taken a negative track across Europe"*. He noted that the situation and the climate are worsening in some countries, such as Ukraine and Lithuania, where compulsory military service has been reintroduced. The reintroduction of conscription is also under discussion in a number of other countries, although in some cases, such as Sweden and Croatia, the term is being used loosely to refer to a short period of military training for a relatively small number of volunteers. In Russia, the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hitherto provided the majority of those admitted to alternative civilian service, have been banned as a subversive organisation, indeed these people who refuse all violence are sometimes being labelled "terrorists". The alternative civilian service remains in place but is a much shrunken programme. And in Switzerland proposed changes to the civilian service which would make it even less satisfactory are currently being debated in Parliament. Meanwhile Turkey remains in a class of its own. It is not there a question of the inadequacy of the provisions for conscientious objectors; alone within the Council of Europe area Turkey has neither recognised conscientious objection nor undertaken to make an alternative civilian service available.

Martina Lanza, EBCO's delegate to the European Youth Forum, said that *"Young people all over Europe should be united against compulsory military service and demand from their governments to invest in education, research, employment, health and culture, rather than conscription and military"*. She underlined that conscription is still enforced in 17 states of the Council of Europe area: Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Greece, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine. Conscription is also imposed by the de facto authorities in a number of territories which are not internationally recognised: Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), Transnistria (Moldova), and the northern part of Cyprus.

With regards to Cyprus, Murat Kanatli, on behalf of the Bi-communal Initiative for Conscientious Objection in Cyprus, referred to the progress made in the northern part of Cyprus, currently under Turkish occupation. Members of Parliament from all political parties had signed a proposal calling on the self-styled "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC) to establish an alternative service and respect the rights of conscientious objectors. Such a development would be inconceivable in Turkey itself! Nevertheless prosecutions of conscientious objectors continue, and four cases are currently before the "TRNC" military courts. He added that although the situation is slightly better in the Republic of Cyprus (where the right to conscientious objection to military service is recognized and an alternative service is provided), the length of the alternative civilian service remains punitive (19 months civilian service versus 14 months military service) and the whole procedure is under the military.



EBCO's press conference, 03/11/2017, UN buffer zone Nicosia, Cyprus



EBCO's public discussion, 03/11/2017, UN buffer zone Nicosia, Cyprus

One excellent news item is that the Republic of Cyprus has within the last month granted asylum to the well-known Turkish conscientious objector and human rights defender, Halil Savda. EBCO members had an informal meeting with Halil on Sunday 5th November. *"We are happy for this recognition which puts an end to Halil Savda's series of prosecutions because of his conscientious objection and non-violent activism for human rights in Turkey. Europe should welcome and protect all refugees who are threatened and persecuted because they stand up against war and human rights violations"*, EBCO President Friedhelm Schneider stated. Halil Savda had been arrested, detained and ill-treated on multiple occasions since 2004 for refusing to perform the compulsory military service in Turkey and for expressing his support for conscientious objectors. He had written articles, given interviews in a number of newspapers and made speeches at protests and meetings against compulsory military service.



EBCO's meeting with Halil Savda, 05/11/2017, Nicosia, Cyprus

EBCO was founded in Brussels in 1979 as an umbrella structure for national associations of conscientious objectors in the European countries to promote the right to conscientious objection to preparations for, and participation in, war and any other type of military activity as a fundamental human right. It enjoys participatory status with the Council of Europe since 1998 and is a member of its Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations since 2005. It provides expertise and legal opinions on behalf of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe. It is involved in drawing up the annual report of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament on the application by the Member States of its resolutions on conscientious objection and civilian service, as determined in the "Bandrés Molet & Bindi Resolution" of 1994. It is a full member of the European Youth Forum since 1995.