



ASEISTAKIELTÄYTYJÄLIITTO
THE UNION OF CONSCIENTIOUS
OBJECTORS

Good afternoon everyone.

I thank UPR Info for this opportunity and all of you for attending this UPR pre-session of Finland.

My name is Jyry Virtanen, I represent AKL, The Union of Conscientious Objectors of Finland and speak here also on behalf of IFOR, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, our international partner.

AKL is an antimilitarist peace organization founded in 1974. It works as a support and advocacy organization for conscientious objectors to military service. In Finland, there are several issues connected to the right to conscientious objections which create discrimination. For instance, there are still imprisoned conscientious objectors to military service. Non-military alternatives to military service are still punitive and discriminatory, notwithstanding recommendations from also within the UN to comply with international standards.

One of the issues is the lack of information. Finnish people assigned male at birth receive a call-up letter on the year they turn 18 years old. On the letter there is a call-up notice, a questionnaire to ascertain military service and state of health⁴ and a guidebook for military service⁵. But there is no information about non-military service in the call-up notice and the information given in the guidebook is very limited and approximately one paragraph in length.

In the last UPR cycle in 2017 Finland received the following recommendation by Uruguay. I quote: "Release prisoners detained as conscientious objectors to military service and ensure that civilian alternatives to military service are not punitive or discriminatory and remain under civilian control." Finland noted the recommendation and referred to the citizen's right to choose to undergo non-military service of 362 days of duration as a non-military alternative to conscription.

The government did not release all detained conscientious objectors and in some cases, imprisonment has been replaced with house arrest.¹ The Human Rights Committee has also reiterated its concerns as the length of non-military service is almost twice the duration of the period of service for the rank and file, and recommended the State party to ensure that the length and nature of the alternatives to military service are

¹ No change either has been applied to the length of alternative service, which is still 347 days, meanwhile, those who serve in the army mostly spend shorter time in duty, website of the Finnish Defence Forces: <https://intti.fi/en/in-service>

not punitive in nature². In addition, the Committee developing the non-military service should be under the control of The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, but The Ministry of Defense has set the basis for the development work, which is why the future of non-military service is not completely under civilian control.

New developments

One of the developments that happened since the last UPR is the removal of exemption from military service which Jehovah's Witnesses had before 2019. Finland thus decided contrary to the recommendation of the UN Human Rights Committee to not to extend the exemption from military and alternative service granted to Jehovah's Witnesses to other objectors due to religious conscience but to remove it³. The government justified this by stating that the removal of exemption from military service that Jehovah's Witnesses had was an implementation measure to promote equality within the institution of military service and that it increased equality between religious communities in Finland.

In fact, the civil service centre does not specifically collect information about the religion of the people applying for non-military service, and according to the manager of the centre the number of applications increased by over 400 after this legislative change. The number of total objections almost doubled from 47 reports in 2018 to 89 reports in 2019 when the legislative change was made.

In March 2020 Finland launched the Parliamentary Committee on Development of conscription and fulfilling national defense obligation which published its report on 26 November 2021⁴. Even though it is The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment that is responsible for the development of non-military service, the basis for the development work was set by the Ministry of Defense. This indicates that the committees and groups developing non-military service are not fully independent from the military authority.

After the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 the number of objectors who refuse to engage in the war and try to flee from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus to look for protection abroad has increased. AKL supports the international protection of the asylum seekers who don't want to bear weapons and are discriminated against in their own countries and demands the Finnish government to ensure that they are granted asylum in Finland. AKL has also launched a project to offer legal counseling to Russian conscientious objectors applying for asylum in Finland. Another development which will likely lead to a concerning increase of the militarization in Finland is its NATO membership application in May 2022.

² Concluding Observation CCPR/C/FIN/7.

³ CCPR/C/QPR/7, 16th April 2019, para 20. See also Concluding Observation to the 2013 Review CCPR/C/CO/FIN/6, 22nd August 2013, para 14.

Ongoing concerning issues

Concerning the issues already mentioned, the army invests a lot of resources to promote military service and it is quite alarming that the Finnish Defence Forces run many programmes and projects to get in touch with Finnish underage children. In 2016, the Finnish Defence Forces launched the five-year project “Get to know the army” (in Finnish, “Intti tutuksi”) whose targets are children of 15 and 16 years old. ⁹ The “Intti tutuksi” project consists of visits to garrisons that offer students an introduction to military equipment and tasks. ¹⁰ The aim is to prepare children for conscription and voluntary military service for women ¹¹.

Recommendations

Following on the above it would be relevant to recommend Finland to:

1. Reduce the length of the alternative non-military service and ensure that alternative to military service is not punitive or discriminatory in its duration and nature and that it is accessible also to those who serve in the military.
2. Guarantee equal access to information regarding the non-military service for conscripts and ensure the same possibility also during the military service.
3. Release all conscientious objectors in prisons or in monitoring sentences and abolish punishments for conscientious objectors to military and alternative service
4. Maintain under civilian control all committees and groups that are in charge of developing or maintaining non-military alternatives to military service and ensure their independence from the military authority.
5. Avoid exposing minors to military initiatives and in particular to the possibility of using weapons, even if replica or demo weapons.

Thank you for your attention.