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Taiwan pardons 21 prisoners of conscience

Reuters (08.12.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (08.12.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian on Friday pardoned 21 convicts, including 19 Jehovah's Witnesses who were jailed for resisting conscription.

The pardon for the prisoners of conscience will go into effect on Human Rights Day on Sunday, the Office of the President said in a statement.

"The president has always attached the utmost importance to human rights," the statement quoted the president's chief of staff Yu Shyi-kun as saying.

Justice Minister Chen Ding-nan said only six of the 19 are in jail. The others have been released on parole.

Jehovah's Witnesses are barred by church rules from conscription, political activities and accepting blood transfusions. The Christian sect believes in the imminent end of the world and refuses to accept civil authority where it clashes with its own principles.

The others pardoned include Tseng Mao-hsing, a labour activist who was jailed in September for 10 months for lying down on railway tracks during a protest by a group of jobless workers in northern Taoyuan county in 1996.

Also pardoned was Su Ping-kun, who was sentenced in absentia in 1987 to 15 years in prison for armed robbery. But he maintains his innocence and was on the run until his arrest in 1998. His sentence has been commuted to 10 years.

President Chen was a lawyer before plunging into politics in the early 1980s. He defended an opposition leader facing the death sentence for defying a martial law ban on street protests and organising a demonstration that turned violent in the southern port city of Kaohsiung in 1979.

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Objectors dodge jail for service

Conscientious objectors: Legislators have passed a law that allows those who will not join the army on principle to serve instead as police officers, social workers, firefighters, or do work in the field of environmental protection

By Irene Lin

STAFF REPORTER

Taipei Times (16.01.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (25.01.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Parents of conscientious objectors were elated after lawmakers voted yesterday to pass the Alternative Service Law, allowing draftees to avoid active duty in favor of other forms of service.

"That's just so great. My dear sons will no longer have to waste their lives in jail for a crime that is not their own fault," said the father of four Jehovah's Witnesses, whose family members have refused to serve in the military.

Before yesterday's enactment, the Chiu family and those of another 27 Jehovah's Witnesses currently in jail or on trial for refusing to serve in the military, have endured the hardship of seeing their sons put in prison for refusing to serve in the military on principle.

The eldest son of Chiu Chao-an (邱朝安), from Tainan, was released from jail last year after serving seven years. His middle son is serving the third year of a seven-year jail term. His youngest son would have faced the same fate.

However, it was a relief for the families to learn the new bill can save them from future imprisonment. Under the new law, Chiu's youngest son -- a high school student expected to serve in the army at the age of 18 -- will be allowed to do alternative service instead.

His middle son has two options under the new law: He can choose to finish his three-year jail term and will then be freed from any form of service; or he can apply to do a full term of alternative service of around two years and nine months.

"I think we'll take the alternative service, despite there being only eight months [of jail] left," Chiu said. "Being jailed for refusing to serve is something we've felt able and willing to endure for our religious convictions. But it's definitely the right choice for my son to spend time doing something meaningful for society, rather than spend his time in jail."

Amid various bills the legislature has pushed through in the last days of the current session, the Alternative Service Law has drawn a great deal of attention from a total of 40,000 Jehovah's Witnesses nationwide.

For more than three decades since the denomination was introduced to Taiwan in the 1960s, over 100 have chosen to serve lengthy jail terms rather than induction.

To their relief, the new law passed yesterday has laid a legal framework for the implementation of alternative service, scheduled to be implemented in July this year.

The interior ministry, in charge of its implementation, is to allow 10,000 male citizens this year to serve terms either in the police, social work, firefighting, or environmental protection. Any male citizens interested in serving the alternative term can file applications to the ministry and lot-drawings will be used where the total number of applications is more than the fixed quota. Those who have been assessed as not being able to serve in the army for religious beliefs will be given priority.

There were also amendments to the existing military service law, which cut the term of army service by two months. Alternative service is longer than military service by a range of between four and six months. Alternative service on religious grounds is longer again at around two years and nine months.

Twenty-eight Jehovah's Witnesses are either currently in prison or on trial for refusing to serve.

The law grants immediate release to those Jehovah's Witnesses who have served more than three years in prison. Those who have served less than three years can choose to finish their three years jail term, or do alternative service when it is launched in July.