

## **Young People Oppose Being Forced to Join the Military**

Some South Koreans and Israelis are working to change their governments' policies requiring them to serve | *As It Is*

Hello, and welcome to *As It Is* from VOA Learning English!

I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, we report on efforts by people in two countries to change their nations' policies of required military service.

"The way conscientious objectors, objectors are treated is of course, you know, is of course, substandard in, in all, you know, human rights senses."

We tell about attempts to change the system of forced military service in South Korea and Israel, today on *As It Is*.

## **South Koreans, Israelis Oppose Forced Military Service**

South Korea requires all able-bodied male citizens to serve about two years in the nation's armed forces. But some object to

military service for moral reasons. Most of them are sent to prison.

They are called “conscientious objectors.” That means a person who refuses to serve in the armed forces for moral or religious reasons. Some conscientious objectors do agree to join the military, but they will not carry or use a weapon.

Kim Ji-kwan was held in prison for more than a year, near the capital Seoul, for refusing to serve in the South Korean military.

“I became a conscientious objector because I learned from the Bible that you have to love your neighbor and your enemy. We should love life.”

His father and two brothers all went to jail for refusing to serve in the military. They are members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, a Christian group. Jehovah’s Witnesses say learning to use weapons, or fighting, violates their religious beliefs.

Kim Ji-kwan says he would like to have served his country in other ways if he had been given the chance.

“If there were an alternative service -- one that does not go against my beliefs -- then I would have done that, a service that does not require actual military training.”

The South Korean government says every year hundreds of men are given prison terms of up to 18 months for refusing military service.

The group *War Resisters International* keeps records about the number of conscientious objectors worldwide. Sergey Sandler works for the group. We spoke to him on Skype.

“According to the data we have, right now the largest number of imprisoned conscientious objectors -- not necessarily the number of objectors themselves -- but of imprisoned conscientious objectors, is currently in South Korea. The way conscientious, conscientious objectors are treated is of course, you know, is of course, substandard in, in all, you know, human rights senses.”

South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense says there are no plans to change the country’s requirement of military service. The ministry says it must keep the requirement in place because of concerns about North Korea and its military.

Lee Jae-seong is a law professor at Konkuk University in Seoul. He says most South Koreans no longer support the government's policies.

"The South Korean government has always stressed security, and they've said that an alternative to military service would harm our safety. But the public no longer believes that. Only the government is holding on to that idea."

Professor Lee notes the findings of a recent public opinion survey. It found that 68 percent of those who were asked like the idea of creating an alternative service, so that conscientious objectors will not have to go to jail.

Kim Ji-kwan says he and the other men in his family did the right thing by going to prison for their beliefs. But he says if he one day has a son, he would not expect him to make the same decision. That is because Mr. Kim believes refusing to serve in the military is a personal decision based on one's own faith.

## **Some Young Israelis Refuse Military Service**

In Israel, some young people are also refusing to obey the country's requirement of military service. They strongly object to the way Israel and its military have been treating Palestinians.

Most Israeli women and men must join the country's Defense Force when they are 18 years old. Men serve for three years; women for about two. Religious Israeli women and Arab citizens are not required to do so. Nor are very religious Israeli men, known as "ultra-orthodox Jews," when they are studying religion. However, that may change under a law being considered by the Israeli parliament.

In March, at least 50 young Israelis wrote a letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It said they would not serve in the military. The young people said the main reason for their refusal to serve is "our opposition to the military occupation of Palestinian territories." They said the Israeli army was guilty of human rights abuses and war crimes, including assassinations and torture.

The Telegraph newspaper reported Israeli finance minister Yair Lapid answered the letter strongly on his Facebook page. It said

he called those who refused to join “pampered, wealthy youngsters.” In his words, “I’m ashamed of them.”

The newspaper reported that refusing to join the Israeli military does not necessarily mean a young person will be put in prison; yet some conscientious or ideological objectors are put in prison. But the report said an Israeli citizen who refused to serve could have difficulty finding a good job or being admitted to a university.

The Telegraph noted that a majority of Israelis support forced military service. It said in Israel, “army service is seen as a near-sacred duty, essential to protect a country surrounded by enemies.”

And that’s our program for today. It was based partly on stories from reporters Jason Strother and Malte Kollenberg in Seoul. We also used information from reports by The Telegraph newspaper, the Associated Press, Al-Jazeera, CommonDreams.org and the Reuters news service.

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I'm Christopher Cruise.

Thanks for listening!

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