

Conference on Alternative Service and Conscientious Objection to Military Service

The Council of Europe and the Office of the High Representative held a conference in Sarajevo yesterday to discuss alternative civilian service and conscientious objection. The Conference was attended by Federation Vice-President Ejup Ganic, representatives of the BiH Presidency, the Standing Committee of Military Matters, the Ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs of both the Federation and the Republika Srpska, as well as of interested civil society groups from BiH, and the International Community.

Alternative civilian service is a method of fulfilling the military service obligation by supporting state and society without participating in the military. The right to conscientious objection and alternative service to military service is an essential component of the universally recognised right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. A conscientious objector is anyone who, for compelling reasons of conscience, refuses to be involved in the use of arms.

The first aim of the conference was the presentation, by Council of Europe experts, of European human rights standards and practices on alternative service and conscientious objection to military service.

The second aim was to spread awareness of the concept of alternative service and conscientious objection in BiH. Attention was drawn to [Annex 7](#) Chapter 2 of the General Framework Agreement for Peace, to the Sarajevo Declaration (February 1998) and to [Annex 1](#) of the Brcko Final Arbitration Award (August 1999). These all call for the implementation of

legislation on conscientious objection and alternative service. Attention was also drawn to the provisions in both Entities' Military Service laws which allow for conscientious objection to military service, and for the fulfillment of the military service obligation in non-military humanitarian, or other, organisations which are beneficial to the country.

The third aim was to point out that, in some respects, each Entity's law does not fully accord with the relevant Council of Europe recommendation [R(87)8], and to consider ways to amend these deficiencies.

The final aim was to consider ways to implement systems of alternative civilian service. For, although the right to perform alternative service exists in the laws, only a few practical steps have been taken so far to make this a reality.

Representatives from both entities' governments, local non-governmental organisations and the International Community participated in a very constructive discussion which sought to identify practical solutions to the specific obstacles currently faced by BiH. It was put forward that both entities' laws, written in 1996, should now be changed.

The following conclusions were drawn: that people shall be informed of the legal right to conscientiously object, and that the State and the governments of both entities should implement economically viable systems of alternative civilian service, with the assistance of local non-governmental organisations and of the International Community.