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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF:
CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE

Written statement* submitted by Pax Christi International, a non-governmental
organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2003]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO MILITARY SERVICE

Pax Christi, the global Catholic peace movement, was born in the aftermath of the Second World War to foster reconciliation between enemies and the creation of a more peaceful and just world order. Fifty-eight years on, we continue to be a strong voice for peace and justice around the world, firmly supporting the founding purpose of the United Nations as articulated in the Charter: “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

In every generation there have been people who conscientiously object to participation in war and military service. For them the term “scourge of war” has not been just a rhetorical description; it accurately portrays suffering endured by countless victims of war. In the past and regrettably still in some countries, those who have refused to participate in war have been regarded as cowards or unpatriotic citizens. They have endured imprisonment, exile and other forms of punishment, even execution in response to their dedication to non-violence.

Myths about the glory and honour of war, often fostered by literature and film, are contradicted by the realities of war and violent social conflict in the modern world. Dictators conscript unwilling citizens into armed forces to force their wills upon their own people. Hundreds of thousands of children are compelled to serve as soldiers, depriving them of their childhood and often their very lives. Terrorists attack unarmed civilians in the mistaken belief that such atrocities will weaken their opponents and win converts to their cause, when the evidence is that such acts only increase the cycle of violence. Far from reducing the number of weapons of mass destruction, some nations seem more committed than ever to maintaining or increasing their reliance on chemical, biological and nuclear weapons; meanwhile, fear grows among peace-loving people throughout the world.

Today in the face of what seems to be a global increase in violence and resort to war, conscientious objectors are increasingly regarded as proverbial “canaries in the coalmine.” Like the small birds that warn coalminers when poisonous gasses are threatening their lives, these brave people warn their fellow citizens of the toxic effect of violence in society and call for non-violent methods to resolve conflicts within and between nations. They reject the notion that violence “works” and refuse to contribute to the spiral of violence that is always the result of modern war. These people are justly regarded as heroes of peace.

Since 1987, the Commission on Human Rights has passed a series of resolutions establishing international standards recognizing the universal human right to be conscientiously opposed to military service and war, even when governments do not yet legally recognize that right. In our day, courageous individuals – in Israel, Colombia, South Korea, the United States and elsewhere -- continue to face hardships due to their refusal to participate in their country’s military service or particular armed conflicts.

Pax Christi International is most grateful for the recognition of these rights as articulated in previous UN resolutions. Pax Christi national sections will continue to offer support and counsel to conscientious objectors around the world. We therefore call on the Commission to:

- Call on member states, as previously requested by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, to report on their “best practices” in relation to policies and experiences of conscientious objectors in their countries. The successful experiences of nations that have

recognized these rights can serve as models for governments seeking to create similar mechanisms.

- Affirm the right to asylum for those who are forced to leave their country in order to flee prosecution and imprisonment due to their conscientious objection to war or military service.
