

## Family of convicted deserter pleads for conscientious objector status

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LAWTON, Okla. (AP) Supporters of a soldier who refused to return to Iraq after a two-week leave urged the Army on Wednesday to give him an honorable discharge, even though he was convicted of desertion last month.

A military hearings officer from Fort Stewart, Ga., heard testimony from character witnesses in a closed hearing to determine if Camilo Mejia should receive conscientious objector status. The hearing was held at the Fort Sill Regional Correctional Facility, where Mejia is being held.

Dozens of Mejia's supporters and relatives held a vigil outside Fort Sill before the hearing. Supporters said at a news conference that Mejia's sincere beliefs led him to refuse to return to his Florida National Guard unit after a two-week leave in October.

"He listened to a higher power, which is the voice of his conscience," Mejia's mother, Maritza Castillo, said in Spanish through an interpreter.

Mejia, 28, was convicted in a military court at Fort Stewart, Ga., of desertion. He was sentenced to a year in military prison, received a dishonorable discharge and was reduced in rank from staff sergeant to private.

A report from Wednesday's hearing will be forwarded to the Department of the Army, which will decide whether to approve Mejia's request.

In his conscientious objector application, Mejia claims he saw Iraqi prisoners treated cruelly while he was overseeing the processing of detainees at al-Assad, an Iraqi air base occupied by U.S. forces.

Among those testifying Wednesday was Daniel Ellsberg, a former military analyst who leaked the 1971 Pentagon Papers, a top secret study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Ellsberg met with Mejia for two hours before the hearing, and said the soldier is "very sincere in his beliefs."

Raymond Schmidt, 40, owner of a military surplus store across the street from the vigil, said he believes Mejia deserved to be punished.

"He signed up knowing someday he'd have to fill a role," Schmidt said.