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Convicted Florida soldier pursuing conscientious objector status

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OKLAHOMA CITY - The first Iraq veteran to refuse to return to war will try to plead his case for conscientious objector status at Fort Sill later this week.

Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, 28, of Miami Beach, Fla., was convicted in a military court at Fort Stewart, Ga., of desertion May 21 after he failed to return to his Florida National Guard unit following a two-week leave in October.

Now he's asking a military hearings officer to recommend that he be considered a conscientious objector to the war in Iraq. Human rights group Amnesty International has already declared Mejia a "prisoner of conscience," said his attorney, Louis Font.

Mejia, who served 5 1/2 months near the Sunni Triangle, said the horrors of war made him a conscientious objector.

"It's his war experiences in Iraq, seeing civilian deaths, abuse of detainees by U.S. soldiers," Font said. "It made him change his beliefs, to be a conscientious objector to all war."

David Ellsberg, a former military analyst who leaked the 1971 Pentagon Papers that showed proof American officials were lying about victory in the Vietnam War, plans to testify on Mejia's behalf at the hearing Wednesday.

Other witnesses for Mejia will include a Roman Catholic bishop, a father whose son died in Iraq, an activist for military families and a peace activist.

In his objector application, Mejia details abuse of Iraqi detainees at Al Asad Air Force Base and deaths of children and other civilians.

Font said his client's situation got worse after information in his objector application was released.

"I've been practicing military law for about three decades and I've never seen anything like this," Font said. "The Pentagon usually gives someone a hearing on their conscientious objector status before convicting them. They moved full steam ahead to convict him after his application."

Mejia, who was a psychology student at the University of Miami before his unit was activated, was sentenced to one year at the Fort Sill Regional Corrections Facility in Lawton, located about 85 miles southwest of Oklahoma City.

He also received a deduction in pay and rank and a dishonorable discharge from the military.

If military officials accept his objector application he will be given an honorable discharge, Font said.

Mejia is in good spirits and grateful for the support he's been shown, Font said.

"His morale is high," Font said. "He has support from all over the world. He's looking forward to this hearing."

Mejia, who moved to the United States from Nicaragua when he was 18, is the son of singer Carlos Mejia Godoy, who is best known for writing the line "Let's fight the Yankee, enemy of humanity," into Nicaragua's former Sandinista anthem.

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www.citizen-soldier.org

www.freecamilo.org