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Family fights to free anti-war soldier from military prison

By Gloria Rubac
Houston

THE MOTHER OF WAR RESISTER CAMILO MEJIA, THE FIRST soldier who refused to return to Iraq, was in Houston in June to visit the Costa Rican Consul General and build support for her son.

Maritza Castillo and her sister, Norma, were guests of Houston ANSWER which organized a reception for them, several radio interviews, a press conference and a delegation of anti-war activists to accompany them to visit the Costa Rican Consulate.

Mejia was sent to Iraq in April 2003 as a Staff Sergeant in the Florida National Guard. He spent six months in combat in Iraq, then returned for a two-week furlough to the U.S. There he reflected on what he had seen, including the abuse of prisoners and the killing of civilians. He concluded that the war was illegal and immoral, and decided that he would not return. In March 2004 he turned himself in to the U.S. military and filed an application for conscientious objector status.

His objections to this abuse were made before the publication of photos of U.S. torture in Abu Ghraib prison, but his trial was in May when there was heightened media attention on this issue. Ramsey Clark, a member of his defense team, spoke of the "incredible irony that we're prosecuting soldiers in Iraq for violations of international law and we're prosecuting a soldier here because he refused to do the same thing."

On May 21, 28-year-old Mejia was sentenced to one year in prison for refusing to return to fight in Iraq. He is serving the time at Fort Sill, Okla.

Mejia is a citizen of both Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The U.S. and Costa Rica have signed a treaty that establishes that a Costa Rican citizen cannot be forced to extend his military service. Mejia's service was due to be up two months after he was sent to Iraq, yet he was shipped out.

Mejia's mother and aunt visited the Consul General in Houston, the closest consulate to Mejia now that he is in Oklahoma. A multinational delegation of anti-war activists and a Pacifica news reporter went with them. After over an hour, the consul told the family she was awaiting word from Costa Rica on how to proceed and that there wasn't funding available for her to visit Mejia at the Army prison. Castillo told her that Costa Rica should stand up to the U.S. and demand the treaty be enforced.

Amnesty International has adopted Mejia as a prisoner of conscience and is demanding his immediate and unconditional release. Mejia is appealing his sentence but the appeal is likely to take longer than one year to be heard. A ruling is expected shortly on his conscientious objector application.

Letters of support can be sent to: Pt. Camilo Mejia, Building 1490, Randolph Road, Fort Sill, OK 73503. Since the military is denying much of his mail, copies should also be sent to his mother at: Maritza Castillo, 201

178 Drive # 323, Miami, FL 33160.

For more information visit www.freecamilo.org

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