

Urgent Action In Focus

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Conscientious objector Abdullah Webster with his baby daughter. © AI 2004

'Conscientious Objector discharge is the most difficult to apply for and obtain'

Abdullah Webster enlisted in the US Army in 1985. He fought in the first Gulf war of 1990-91, and later served as a peacekeeper in Bosnia, Kosovo and Korea. He converted to Islam in 1994: believing that his religion prohibited him from taking part in any war of aggression, he applied to be treated as a conscientious objector when he was ordered to deploy to Iraq in 2003. Instead he was imprisoned for his beliefs.

In December that year the Pentagon announced that 5,500 soldiers had deserted since the start of the war in Iraq. This is the easy way to escape military service: according to a lawyer representing conscientious objector Camilo Mejía, "I have found that Conscientious Objector discharge is the most difficult discharge in the military to apply for and obtain."

After a series of unsuccessful applications

to be treated as a conscientious objector, or transferred to non-combat duties, in June 2004 Abdullah Webster was imprisoned for 14 months, on charges of failing to obey commands and missing his brigade's deployment to Iraq. He was also given a bad conduct discharge; his salary was suspended, and despite his 20 years of service (he had been due to retire in 2005) he is to lose his pension and other benefits. The Army justified its final rejection of his application for conscientious objector status on the grounds that his objection was not to war in general but to the Iraq war in particular. According to US Army Regulations, requests for qualification as a conscientious objector will not be favourably considered when such requests are based on objection to a specific war.

Prisoner of conscience Camilo Mejía had been imprisoned by the US military just

two weeks before Abdullah Webster, also on account of his conscientious objection to the war in Iraq. When Sue Webster, his wife, saw the UA issued on Camilo Mejía's behalf (UA 190/04, AMR 51/092/2004, 3 June 2004, and follow-ups), she contacted Amnesty International, on 2 September 2004. The USA research team moved swiftly to investigate the case, and Abdullah Webster was adopted as a prisoner of conscience. We issued an Urgent Action on his behalf on 17 September (UA 267/04, AMR 51/137/2004), while Sue Webster was fighting an increasingly lonely battle, and felt that no-one else was listening to her pleas on behalf of her husband.

"Amnesty International came to our aid at a time when a lot of doors were closing. It certainly encouraged me to pursue this and it certainly encouraged him to realise that there are people out there who do appreciate and see the dilemma that he was in and who are also willing to help him"

Since we issued the UA on his behalf, members of the UA network have sent thousands of appeals to those with the authority to release Abdullah Webster, and he has received letters sent by Amnesty supporters from around the world. This is one of his replies, to an Amnesty group in the UK:

"I would like to thank you all for your support. I received your card at the end of the day. Your card tilts the scales from a good day to a wonderful day. To me the end of a day means one less day in confinement and one day closer to returning to my family. So once again thank you all for making my day a wonderful one"

Sue Webster believes that the UA network's appeals are having an effect. When he was transferred from the US

Army base at Mannheim in Germany to detention in the USA, in October 2004, she received a letter from the army advising her that Abdullah had been moved. The letter also explained the procedures required for her to visit him. Previously she felt that she had been kept in the dark about developments.

"It does seem as though they are taking extra care now to 'dot the i's and cross the t's' in terms of keeping me informed even though it was a bit late... Let's hope and pray that our petitioning may change his sentencing...The timing of this last minute move [the transfer to the USA] seems to also tie in with the Urgent Appeal which started approx 17 Sept so I guess we are ruffling a few feathers"

The UA network's appeals and letters of support to Camilo Mejía also "ruffled a few feathers". For instance, his lawyer reported that on one day alone last year Camilo Mejía received 731 pieces of mail from Amnesty members and supporters. Not only do these letters "greatly boost his morale", they also "show prison officials that he has support". Camilo Mejía sent a message from prison via his lawyer thanking all Amnesty members for their support.

Camilo Mejía was deployed to Iraq in April 2003, but began developing objections to the war after witnessing abuse and ill-treatment. He also began to doubt the morality and legality of the war. He returned home for two weeks leave in October 2003 and subsequently failed to return to duty in Iraq. He filed for discharge as a conscientious objector on 16 March 2004, stating that he believed the war and occupation of Iraq to be "illegal and immoral". Despite his pending application, he was court-martialled and sentenced to one year's imprisonment for "desertion".

The UA on behalf of Camilo Mejía generated thousands of appeals, including special appeals from junior UA networks in some countries. As with the case of Abdullah Webster, the publication of the UA also greatly increased media attention and public awareness of his case, leading to further pressure on the US authorities to take action. Just as importantly both men's families were encouraged to know of the widespread international solidarity. Perhaps more importantly still, both prisoners knew that there were people out there mobilizing to secure their early release.

Camilo Mejía was unable to read all the letters he received and could not respond to all of those. One letter he did manage to send to a member in Spain simply says that:

"I just received your letter, huge amounts have arrived from your country...I was very happy to know that I have the support of so many people... even though I cannot read the letters of the majority of people who have written. Nevertheless, at least to some of these people I can express my gratitude with all my heart. Thank you for your solidarity and your love, and I send you a big hug, to you and to all the Spanish lovers of freedom and justice"

Camilo Mejía was released on 15 February 2005, three months before the

end of his one-year sentence. In a telephone conversation with Amnesty International, Camilo Mejía expressed his profound gratitude to all who had taken up his case. He received thousands of letters of support from UA network members while he was in prison. His lawyer said, "I want to thank Amnesty International for its campaign on Camilo's behalf. I believe the campaign was very important in protecting Camilo in the prison environment, and in securing his release on the minimum date rather than the maximum date."

The early release of Camilo Mejía has given renewed hope to Abdullah Webster and his family, and is visible proof of the power of the UA network to make a positive difference.