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USA: Abdullah Webster and Camilo Mejia's message after being released

Abdullah Webster

Before my wife's return to the UK I wanted to take this opportunity to thank every one at Amnesty International for their prayers and support. Your support really helped me during my time at Mannheim and Fort Lewis. I received many letters from all around the world, even though over 30 were returned or denied. It was also brought to my attention that several letters were also returned without informing me. To those whose letters were returned without my knowledge, I offer my thanks and I am touched for you taking the time to encourage me throughout the past 11 months.

Since being out, I have noticed that there are various accounts stating why I'd refused to go to Iraq. I had actually informed my command that we are taught to train soldiers to be Mentally, Physically, and Spiritually prepared for war. As time wore on it transpired that the reason for this war was false – there had not been any weapons of mass destruction. Given the legality of the war it was considered to be unjust and I was not mentally nor spiritually prepared to partake in an unjust war. My faith forbids me from participating in an unjust war which will subsequently result in the taking of innocent life, be they non Muslim or Muslim. I truly believe that I would have been held accountable before Allah (God) if I had gone, knowing the war to be unjust and I would not have been able to function fully to the same capacity as I have done the past 19 years of my career as a soldier. It was therefore not an easy decision, nor one taken lightly to refuse to go to Iraq.

During my time in Fort Lewis and Mannheim I met several soldiers who served in Iraq. I can recall a couple of stories that really cemented the fact that I had made the right decision. One soldier informed me that he was on a convoy and a group of local people was blocking their path. He stopped his vehicle but his commander told him to carry on. The group slowly broke up with the exception of a child blocking their way. The soldier recalled how at night he can still see when his vehicle hit the little child and how the other vehicles behind him kept running over the child's body. He had informed me that if he could do it all over again he wouldn't have gone to Iraq. Another story was that a soldier regretted the fact that he didn't intervene nor took any action when his fellow squad member was raping the wife and daughter of the husband who refused to give them any information during their searches. How could I look my God and my family in the face had I gone and was present at incidents such as these?

My experience in confinement had its ups and downs. The lowest point during my time there was when I was not allowed to contact my family, but generally God enabled me to learn from my experience and draw strength from it. I was also able to try to help others whilst there. The good days were when I met several people who were willing to turn their lives around. A lot of the ones there thought I was there unjustly because I was there because of my faith. Several of the guys looked at how I dealt with my experience and they thought that given the way that I had been treated, and the good way I was coping with it, it inspired them to cope better with their situation. Several of the soldiers - both inmates and guards - needed advice or

a listening ear and would come to me. Even up to the day of my leaving they had asked what they are going to do now that I was going. I had said that they needed to rely on each other for their support.

I was surprised to also find out that I had been an inspiration to my wife whilst inside. I had been thinking that she was a source of strength in keeping the family together and working so hard with organizations such as Amnesty International, letting people know what had happened to me, as well as taking care of our two year old daughter. Instead she had told me that because I referred to each day as being one day less inside, she began to view our circumstances in the same way. It truly was a blessing to be reunited with them again and to see how much my baby had grown.

If there was one thing I hope to come out of my experience it is the fact that the army needs to review its policy on how it treats conscientious objectors. The army regulations pertaining to conscientious objectors do not take into account of a war being illegal or unjust preventing a soldier from performing his duties in that particular war. It is too cut-and-dry. Not all soldiers object to all wars – as in this case the real reason for going to war seem somewhat obscure. Not all soldiers belong to just one faith – there are many soldiers now from various religious backgrounds and the current conscientious objector regulations/guidelines do not take this into account. We do realize and can ascertain when a war is wrong and we may come across a situation such as this one where the United Nations have recognized a war as illegal to the point that it clashes with our religious belief. We should be given the option to resign if no other options are available. As a result of the current situation soldiers have no other option but to go AWOL because they realize that the punishment for going AWOL is less than going through their chain of command and objecting to a war which is unjust. This should not be the case and we should try to support those soldiers genuine in their conscientious beliefs.

We all still wish to protect our families and our country and it is my hope that after my experience, soldiers in a similar situation to myself will receive the support they need in order to continue to carry out their duties.

Sincerely

Abdullah W B Webster.

Camilo Mejia

I want to thank all the people and all the organizations who have supported my family and me throughout this most difficult time in our lives. I am now free from prison, but it was because of all of you that I remained a free man during my incarceration. I was not able to read all the mail that was sent, in part because prison rules did not allow it, and in part because I received thousands upon thousands of letters from all over the world. In time I will read all of them, and I will answer as many as I can. From the bottom of my heart, and on behalf of my family, my attorneys, and myself, thank you all.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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