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USA: International Conscientious Objector Day marked by sentencing Pablo Paredes to three months of hard labour

While claiming to champion human rights, the US government continues to convict people for exercising their freedom of thought, conscience and religion, Amnesty International said today as US naval officer Pablo Paredes is sentenced to three months' hard labour for refusing to participate in the war on Iraq.

"The right to refuse to perform military service is a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It is particularly indefensible that anyone should be imprisoned whilst pursuing a claim through established procedures," said Amnesty International.

Officer Paredes' conviction and sentence, passed on 12 May 2005 was imposed despite his pending claim for conscientious objector status. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally.

23-year-old Pablo Paredes was convicted because of refusing to board the USS Bonhomme Richard as it deployed to the Gulf region on 6 December 2004. His refusal to deploy was based on his moral objection to the war in Iraq and belief that the war was illegal.

Pablo Paredes has stated that "beyond having a duty to my chain of command and my president, I have a higher duty to my conscience and to the supreme law of the land."

He filed for conscientious objector status on 4 January 2005. The investigating officer has made an initial assessment that this application be denied on the basis that his beliefs are political in nature and that his objection is to the Iraq war in particular rather than to all wars.

Amnesty International considers a conscientious objector to be any person who, for reasons of conscience or profound conviction, refuses to perform service in the armed forces or any other direct or indirect participation in wars or armed conflicts, including people who refuse to participate in particular wars. However the US Military Selective Service Act stipulates that objection must be to participation in war of any form by reason of religious, ethical, or moral belief.

Amnesty International is calling on the US government to immediately and unconditionally revoke Pablo Paredes' sentence.

Background Information

Pablo Paredes is the third US conscientious objector adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International since the Iraq war began. The other two were Camilo Mejía and Abdullah Webster, both now

released from military detention.

Since his release on 30 April, Abdullah Webster has elaborated on his reasons for objecting to participating in the war in Iraq "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."

Amnesty International is also closely following the case of Army Sergeant Kevin Benderman who developed conscientious objections during his first deployment in Iraq. His Courts-Martial also began on 11 May but was postponed after the military judge determined that previous proceedings may have been biased against him. He faces a court-martial on charges of desertion and a possible seven year sentence.

A growing number of objectors to the war in Iraq from the USA are also seeking refugee status in Canada, including Jeremy Hinzman whose application for asylum was denied in March 2005. If he is forcibly returned to the USA and imprisoned on the basis of his conscientious objection, Amnesty International would adopt him as a prisoner of conscience. Jeremy Hinzman's application for conscientious objector status was turned down in April 2003. When he received notice of his unit's deployment to Iraq he decided to leave the military without leave as he considered that his participation in the war in Iraq would be a violation of his conscience, religious principles and international law. In early January 2004 he went to Canada and submitted a refugee claim.

For further information, please see:

USA: Jeremy Hinzman – Conscientious objector seeking refuge in Canada:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR510752005>

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

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR510762005>

Interviews with Camilo Mejia and his mother: <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGAMR511742004>

Public Document

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