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**USA: An urgent call for the release of prisoner of conscience,
Camilo MejPa Castillo**
An open letter to President George W. Bush

George W. Bush
The President
The White House
Office of the President
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington DC 20500
USA

14 June 2004

Dear Mr President,

On 21 May 2004, a US military court sentenced Staff Sergeant Camilo MejPa Castillo of the Florida National Guard to the maximum penalty of one year's imprisonment for desertion. He had refused to return to his unit in Iraq, citing moral reasons and his misgivings about the legality of the war and the conduct of US troops towards Iraqi civilians and prisoners. He is currently detained in a military prison at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Amnesty International considers him to have been imprisoned because of his refusal on conscientious grounds to perform military service. The organization has accordingly adopted him as a prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Camilo MejPa is Amnesty International's first prisoner of conscience in the USA since the first Gulf War, when the organization campaigned for the freedom of a number of prisoners of conscience in the USA.

Camilo MejPa's trial and sentencing went ahead despite a pending decision by the army on his application for conscientious objector status and despite his previous efforts, based on his nationality, to secure his discharge from military obligations. Amnesty International believes that in these circumstances he should not have faced a penalty for "desertion" and calls upon you to take steps to secure his immediate and unconditional release.

While recognizing that Camilo MejPa went absent without leave from the army, Amnesty International considers that he did take reasonable steps to secure his discharge from military obligations through legal means, including applying for conscientious objector status.

Amnesty International considers that Camilo MejPa has genuinely conscientious grounds for his objection to war, which evolved during the period he served in Iraq in 2003 and in particular in response to his witnessing human rights violations by US agents in Iraq. He has spoken about the abuses he witnessed, the conditions of detention and treatment of detainees and the killing of civilians, including children. His objections to such abuses were made before the publication in April 2004 of photographs of US agents submitting Iraqi detainees to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Amnesty International is of the view that the right to refuse to perform military service for reasons of conscience is inherent in the notion of freedom of thought, conscience and religion as recognised in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In its general comment No. 22 on article 18 of the ICCPR, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations has reaffirmed that the right to conscientious objection to military service is a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Thousands of Amnesty International members around the world are campaigning for the release of Camilo MejPa, calling on the US authorities to immediately and unconditionally release him. We ask you, as Commander-in-Chief of the US armed forces, to take action now to secure Camilo MejPa's release and to ensure that in future no-one in the USA is imprisoned for reasons of conscience. No member of the US armed forces who has, or who develops over time, a conscientious objection to performing military service should be imprisoned on that account where they have taken reasonable steps to secure their discharge.

I trust that you will give this matter your urgent attention,

Yours sincerely

Irene Khan
Secretary General.

Cc Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld