



# Amnesty International

Orange County

GROUP 141 ORANGE • GROUP 175 LONG BEACH  
GROUP 178 IRVINE • GROUP 596 HUNTINGTON BEACH

June 2004

<http://www.aiusaoc.org>

## USA: Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia Castillo Is a Prisoner of Conscience

*This article is taken from a June 4 AI press release.*

On May 21, 2004, a US military court sentenced Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejia 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, the legality of the war and the conduct of US troops towards Iraqi civilians and prisoners. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for his conscientious opposition to participating in war.

The sentence was imposed despite a pending decision by the army on his application for conscientious objector status. During the trial his lawyers were not permitted to present arguments relating to his conscientious objection, including describing the abuse he witnessed. He is currently detained in a military prison at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The sentence is under appeal, but the appeal process is expected to be lengthy.

Camilo Mejia was deployed to Iraq in April 2003. He began developing doubts about the morality and legality of the war. In October 2003 he returned home for two weeks leave. He failed to return to duty in Iraq and 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."

In his conscientious objector application, Camilo Mejia described the conditions of detention and treatment of Iraqi prisoners, including instances where soldiers were directed to "break the detainees' resolve," and who took actions which included banging on metal walls with sledgehammers to enforce sleep deprivation, and loading pistols near the ears of prisoners. He also described witnessing the killing of civilians, including children.

Camilo Mejia has described the evolution of his beliefs, what he witnessed and did in Iraq, all of which compelled him to take a stand on the basis of conscience. His objections to such abuse were made before the publication of photographs of US agents physically and mentally torturing and abusing Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, but his trial came at a time of heightened media attention on this issue. A member of his defense team, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, 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 things."

Amnesty International has adopted Camilo Mejia as a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate and unconditional release. He is the first US soldier known to be tried for "desertion" after service in combat in the current Iraq conflict.

Amnesty International believes he has been imprisoned for his conscientious objection to the war in Iraq despite having taken reasonable steps to secure his discharge from the army.

Prior to his conviction, Camilo Mejia said 'I have no regrets, not one . . . I will take it because I go there with my honor, knowing I have done the right thing.'

### **Background**

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. This can include volunteer soldiers who have developed a conscientious objection after joining the armed forces. Whenever such a person is detained or imprisoned solely because they have been denied or refused their right to register an objection or to perform a genuinely civilian alternative service, Amnesty International considers that person to be a prisoner of conscience.

AI also considers conscientious objectors to be prisoners of conscience if they are imprisoned as a consequence of leaving the armed forces without authorization for reasons of conscience, if because of those reasons, they have taken reasonable steps to secure release from military obligations.

It is evident from the statement Camilo Mejia has made in his application for conscientious objector status that he is a genuine conscientious objector whose objection to war evolved in response to witnessing human rights violations in Iraq. He sought discharge as a non-US citizen with more than eight years service with the US army on the basis of such objection, and subsequently applied for conscientious objector status. Accordingly, AI believes that he should not have been tried and imprisoned for "desertion" and should be released immediately and unconditionally.

AI has documented cases of torture and ill-treatment of detainees in Iraq and raised its concerns with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) as well as the US and UK governments. Detainees were forced to lie face down on the ground, handcuffed, hooded or blindfolded during arrest. During interrogation they were reportedly repeatedly beaten and restrained for prolonged periods in painful positions, while some were also subjected to sleep deprivation, prolonged forced standing, and exposed to loud music and bright lights to disorient them. Some died in custody allegedly as a result of torture.

## May Meeting Minutes

### Group #141 Orange

#### Letter-Writing

The group wrote letters to Tom Ridge at the Department of Homeland Security, to Iraq to protest the prisoner treatment at Abu Ghraib, to Washington, DC, to protest the continued incommunicado detention of Yaser Hamdi and Jose Padilla, to Rwanda to protest the treatment of rape victims, and to Vietnam for our prisoner of conscience. Several of us have received letters from David Jospheh, the Haitian teenager being denied asylum by Attorney General, John Ashcroft. He has requested books and stamps as he has to buy them himself and, of course, has no income.

#### Meeting News

A Reminder! This was our last meeting at Church of the Messiah and we are taking a break for the summer. We will meet next at the Sisters of St. Joseph in Orange on the third Tuesday of September.

## May Meeting Minutes

### Group #178 Irvine

#### Discussion

At our May meeting the featured speaker was Pat McCully from *Círculo de Amigas*. *Círculo de Amigas* is a cooperative aiming to educate people in a mountainous area in Nicaragua, to provide them with health care, and to help them achieve self-sufficiency. The organization was started by Ms. McCully, a Spanish high school teacher in Huntington Beach, after a student asked her "How can you criticize what the American government is doing in Nicaragua? You've never even been there!"

You can find out more about *Círculo de Amigas* at the website <http://www.camigas.org>.

#### Attendees

We had several visiting students from the UCI Amnesty International group. They are interested in participating in our group events and invited us to join them in their events. At the end of May they had an "AmnesTea" event—coffee, tea and human rights discussion. They will provide us with information to have their meetings mentioned in our newsletter and on our webpage.

#### Next Meeting

At our next meeting we plan on showing the video *In the Shadow of the Pagodas*, directed by Irene Marty, a documentary on human rights in Myanmar.

#### Upcoming Events

Our September meeting will feature a panel discussion on Afghanistan.

## May Meeting Minutes

### Group #596 Huntington Beach

#### May Meeting

For our May meeting we had over 20 people in attendance and saw a new video on the human rights abuses in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the current issues with the U.S. led

occupation. We also had Ahmad Ebrahimi who is a writer from Iran. He also showed a video on Iran political history, part of which dealt with censorship of writers and specifically mentioned Amnesty International and the work we've done to ensure freedom of expression in Iran. It was a wonderful evening!

#### Upcoming Meetings

For June, we will meet at 6:30 PM and discuss our next two upcoming events:

In July, we will focus on the issue of **human trafficking**. We will show the documentary *Trading Women* and have two speakers: Lisa Ramirez an immigration attorney that helps victims of human trafficking, and Todd Tristan, a United States District Attorney who works with the human trafficking team for the U.S. Department of Justice.

In August, we will have a special meeting on **gay and lesbian issues**. We will be showing the documentary *Jim in Bold* (synopsis is below) and we will have three speakers. Our first speaker is Truly St. Bonore who will describe her experiences and struggles after learning during her adolescent years that her father was actually gay. Our second speaker is a Franciscan brother and pediatrician who has done extensive research on the suicide rates of young gay and lesbian teenagers. Our final speaker is Ken Saragosa, chair of Soka University's English Department, who himself has been a victim of hate crimes due to his homosexuality. We will provide letter writing actions covering human rights abuses directed at gay and lesbian activists and violent attacks/harassment against gay and lesbian individuals around the world.

The documentary *Jim in Bold* was inspired by Jim Wheeler, a young gay man from Lebanon, Pennsylvania, who committed suicide shortly after graduating high school. In his memory, three young gay men embark on a journey across the United States interviewing other young gay and lesbian individuals about their experiences both positive and negative. This documentary is also interlaced with interviews with Jim Wheeler's family that is often sad, thought-provoking and finally inspiring. Trailers of the documentary are available at the website [www.jiminbold.com](http://www.jiminbold.com).

#### Recap

Since March of 2004 we have generated the following:

**574 letters:** This includes letters for the murdered and missing women of Juarez (President Vicente Fox just assigned a new Special Prosecutor to these cases and 81 Mexican officials are under official investigation in connection with these crimes); Sudan (Relief agencies are finally being allowed into the Dafur region); prison abuse in Afghanistan and Iraq; and many others.

**62 Faxes:** Sent out for Urgent Actions on Mariela Giraldo Herrera and Nicasio Sanchez in Columbia and for Siamak Pourzand in Iran (no current updates at this time).

**37 petitions** dealing with the Iraq prison abuse scandal, CEDAW, the missing and murdered women of Juarez and many more issues.

**322 packets** were distributed with information on Amnesty, our local group, and letters for people to send in on their own!

## May Meeting Minutes Group #175 Long Beach

### Attendees

Mary Kay Dunn, Norma Edwards, Kevin Gaffney, Deidre Jackson, Bobbie Kendig, Michelle McHale, Omar Ramos, and Jim Roberts.

### Letter-Writing

We generated 41 letters (20 international and 21 domestic) and 8 postcards.

### Meeting Minutes

Deidre and Jamie talked about the Annual General Meeting which they attended in Brooklyn in April. They described some of the workshops which were given.

Jamie gave an update on the Women's Campaign. She also announced that she has been appointed the Southern California Coordinator for Stop Violence Against Women.

Jim gave the results of the Board Election. All winners were reform candidates.

Deidre and Kevin gave a training on the death penalty which was very informative.

We had a lively discussion about torture, the Geneva Convention, and Abu Ghraib.

Finally, it was decided to table the downtown Farmers' Market on June 18, 2004.

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## From the Executive Director A Few Bad Apples?

*This column, by AIUSA Executive Director William Schulz, is taken from the June 2004 AIUSA Monthly Mailing.*

What could possess seven young Americans to treat Iraqi prisoners with the kind of cruelty we have seen with our very eyes the past few weeks? Was it lack of training, as we have been told? But learning not to beat a helpless person, not to humiliate and degrade them, is something every one of us should have learned at our mother's and father's knees.

Was it a personal proclivity for violence manifesting itself in these seven individuals? Solzhenitsyn wrote in *Gulag Archipelago*, "The dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being and who is willing to destroy his own heart?"

He may well be right but, much as our government would like us to believe that this incident is no more than the perverse acting out by a "few rotten apples," we know better.

And the reason we know better is that for more than a year Amnesty International has been raising the alarm about U.S. mistreatment of prisoners—first in Afghanistan; then at Guantanamo Bay; then at diverse secret detention centers housing Al Qaeda suspects; and, from July of last year, in Iraq itself. My colleagues at other U.S. human rights organizations and I personally raised these concerns in face-to-face meetings at the highest levels of the Pentagon and National Security Council, but our pleas for investigation and intervention obviously were ignored.

The torture of prisoners in U.S. custody goes back generations—to at least the war in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century—and has been exacerbated since 9/11. Nor is it the military or Defense Department or even the CIA alone who are responsible. When Vice President Cheney can call those suspected of being terrorists "barbarians" and President Bush can characterize the war on terror as a war against Absolute Evil, they imply that our adversaries are somehow less than human and hence undeserving of those fundamental rights every human may claim.

The "chattering class" too carries its share of the blame—all those pundits and commentators, like Jonathan Alter in *Newsweek* or Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School or Bruce Hoffman of RAND, who suggested that following 9/11 the rules have somehow changed and torture may now be defensible. They created the intellectual cover under which those officials who ordered the abusive treatment have tried to hide.

But Amnesty International will not let them. This kind of situation is exactly what we were born for. Over the past two weeks AIUSA has taken the lead in condemning these actions in the media and calling for accountability, just as we took the lead a year ago in exposing the malicious behavior in the first place.

Amnesty spokespeople have appeared repeatedly on the national news, on National Public Radio, on one talk show after another, to explain what has been going on and demand that those who are responsible be brought to justice.

And over the next few weeks we will be working with our grassroots membership to mobilize teach-ins, demonstrations, community forums and online actions to insure that citizens demand an end to torture carried out in their name.

Torture never makes the world a safer place, only a more hideous one. How many more people hate the United States today than did before these insidious deeds were revealed? Nicholas Berg has already paid with his life. How many more will have to pay with theirs before this scourge is lifted?

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If you would like to continue receiving this newsletter and supporting the work of the Orange County and Long Beach Amnesty International groups, please return this coupon to the address below with annual dues of \$10.00. Dues are used to cover the costs of this newsletter and of letters on behalf of prisoners. Your address label contains your membership expiration date.

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**Return to:**  
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Irvine, CA 92623-4485

**For (check one):**  
 Orange Group  
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 Huntington Beach  
 Long Beach

*Please make your check payable to Amnesty International. Contributions to AI are tax-deductible. Thank you for your interest and support!*

# Calendar

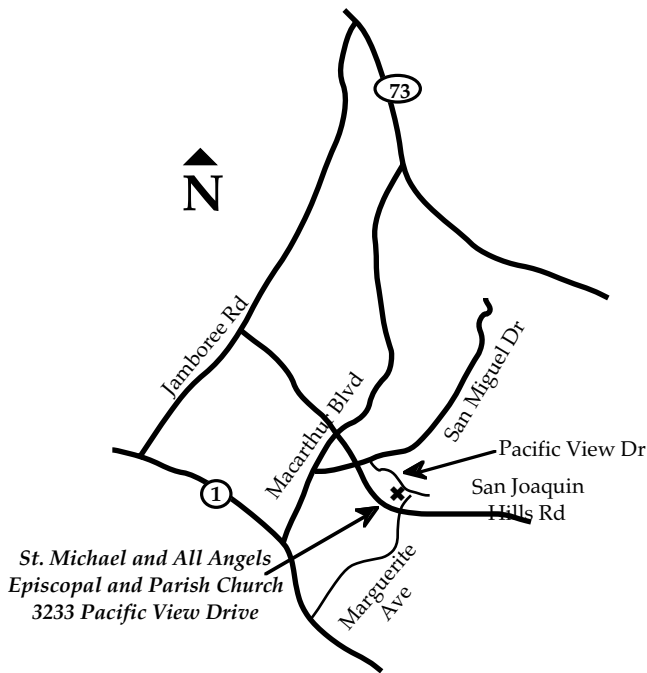
## June

21 Monday 7:30–9:30 PM

**“No Exceptional Circumstances Whatsoever”: Torture and the War on Terrorism**, a program in observance of the United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, at Barnsdall Gallery Theatre, 4800 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood. Admission is free. Donations are welcome. This is sponsored by The Program for Torture Victims, in association with Amnesty International and other organizations. For more information call (213) 747-4944 ext. 248

28 Monday 7:00 PM

**Group #596 Huntington Beach Meeting** at Saints Simon and Jude Church, Room 7A, 20444 Magnolia Street in Huntington Beach. Group #596 meets the last Monday of each month. For further information about the group, contact Darcie Olson at (949) 650-5375.



Group #178 Irvine Meeting Location

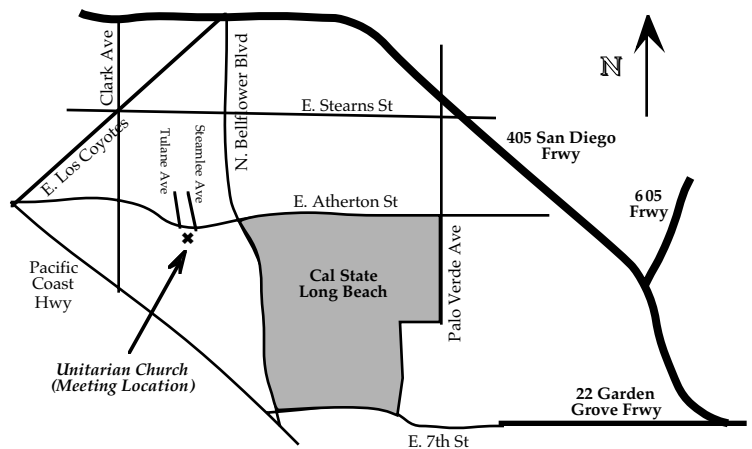
29 Tuesday 7:00 PM

**Group #175 Long Beach Monthly Meeting** at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 5450 Atherton Street, Long Beach. Letter-writing from 7:00–7:30. Group #175 meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month. For further information about the group, contact Bobbi Kendig at (562) 420-1155.

29 Tuesday 7:00 PM

**Group #178 Irvine Monthly Meeting** at St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal and Parish Church, 3233 Pacific View Drive, Corona del Mar. See full details on the web page <http://www.aiusaoc.org>. Group #178 meets the last Tuesday of each month. For more information about the group, contact Jacques Kilchoer at (714) 557-8427.

Group #141 Orange is on hiatus for the summer and will resume meeting in September on the third Tuesday of each month.



Group #175 Long Beach Meeting Location

Amnesty International Local Group 178  
Post Office Box 14485  
Irvine, California 92623-4485