

US soldier who opposes Afghan war sentenced

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A US Army Specialist and veteran of the war in Iraq will face jail time for refusing to deploy to Afghanistan. The non-commissioned officer objects to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on principle, claiming the US military occupies both countries in violation of international law.

Spc. Victor Agosto, 24, from Miami, served a 13-month tour in Iraq with the Army's 57th Battalion. Although his four-year enlistment should have ended August 4, Agosto received orders in May to report to an Army office to begin the paperwork for overseas deployment to Afghanistan. He was informed that his military service was to be involuntarily extended under the "stop-loss" program.

When he received his reporting orders, Agosto wrote a letter refusing deployment. "There is no way I will deploy to Afghanistan," wrote Agosto. "The occupation is immoral and unjust. It does not make the American people any safer. It has the opposite effect."

Agosto has now been court-martialed. After a one-hour hearing August 5, a military court in Ft. Hood, Texas, demoted Agosto to the rank of private and sentenced him to 30 days in jail. When he heard the sentence, Agosto ripped from his uniform the patch displaying his specialist rank, symbolically embracing his demotion. After completing his jail sentence, Agosto will likely receive a less-than-honorable discharge.

The stop-loss program originated in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, coinciding with the elimination of the draft in the US. Conscription fueled mass opposition to US militarism among civilians and soldiers alike, which in turn contributed to the American government's inability to continue prosecuting the Vietnam War. Ultimately, the US was forced to withdraw from Vietnam in 1975.

Conscious of the effect popular discontent could have

on its ability to carry out future imperialist adventures, the US ruling class eliminated the draft in 1972. Congress passed the stop-loss legislation in an effort to maintain a semblance of voluntarism without incurring chronic, debilitating troop shortages in the process. Since the beginning of the current war in Iraq, over 140,000 soldiers have had their terms involuntarily extended under the stop-loss policy.

The extent to which soldiers oppose the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is difficult to gauge, in part because most resisters either simply go AWOL (absent without leave), or purposely defy army regulations in order to be discharged. According to the *Courage to Resist* web site, "Since 2002, the Army has court-martialed twice as many soldiers for desertion and other unauthorized absences per year than for each year between 1997 and 2001. AWOL rates in the Army are at their highest since 1980, with the desertion rate having jumped 80 percent since the start of the Iraq War, according to the Associated Press."

Agosto, conscious of the consequences he faced, made his objections public in an effort to mobilize resistance to the wars among the military rank-and-file.

"I learned of the effect of the GI resistance movement during the Vietnam War," Agosto explained in an interview given to the "Democracy Now!" radio program on the day of his trial. "I felt that if I were to go AWOL my commanders could tell other soldiers that I left because I was scared, because I had other reasons. Whereas by staying on base I can set an example for other soldiers to see that I think this war is wrong, and I am just not going to do it, and I think they should do the same."

Agosto is unapologetic about his refusal to deploy. In a statement issued to the press after he was sentenced, Agosto said, "I have learned that there is nothing more frightening to power than a direct and principled challenge to its authority. The truth is on our side, and

those who have incarcerated me know it.... My only in.”
apologies are to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. I
hope that someday they can forgive me for my
contributions to their distress.”

Asked by Amy Goodman of “Democracy Now!” if he would apply for conscientious objector status, Agosto replied that he would not. “As far as the army is concerned,” said Agosto, “a conscientious objector is someone who is opposed to all wars, and that is not me. I believe that sometimes war is necessary in cases of legitimate self-defense and legitimate resistance.... We’re just killing people and spreading suffering with no real justification.”

Agosto argues that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan violate international law. In the case of Afghanistan, to which Agosto refused to be deployed, the US ruling elite justified the occupation on the grounds that the country was harboring Osama Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders, who were allegedly responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Nearing the end of the eighth year of the war and occupation, any pretense of hunting for Bin Laden has been dropped. The Afghan war has been escalated by Obama, who was elected in large part because of popular hopes that he would bring the disastrous conflicts in the region to an end.

Asked by Goodman whether it surprised him that Obama had escalated the war in Afghanistan, Agosto replied, “No. No, it doesn’t, because he said he would do so during his campaign. Part of why I’m doing what I’m doing is because I don’t believe that any politician can end this war. I think that it has to be ended at the grassroots level. Soldiers, by refusing to fight, can bring about the end of the war.”

Agosto is quite correct to argue that both the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan violate international law. His advice to other soldiers? “I would say that you would never—you’ll never regret following your conscience and that adherence to an oath is not a valid excuse for betraying your conscience.”

Agosto told *Courage to Resist* that he has received support from fellow soldiers at Ft. Hood. “Some of the people in my unit will flash me peace signs when they walk by me,” he explains. “The other day when I was coming back from the shop, this soldier stopped me and said he wanted to shake my hand. He told me he looked up to me for not going to fight a war I don’t believe



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