

Graphic Testimony at Hussein Trial

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By Christine Hauser

In a graphic account that he said was difficult to put into words, a Kurdish man testified today during the genocide trial of Saddam Hussein that when he and other Kurds came under attack in the mountains of northern Iraq in 1988, he was splashed with a liquid that burst from falling rockets, searing his eyes and skin.

The account, given by Omer Othman Mohammed, was the latest in what is likely to be a lengthy series of descriptions by Kurds offered in evidence during the trial, Mr. Hussein's second since his overthrow.

At another point during the court session in Baghdad today, the lead prosecutor, Munqith al-Faroon, demanded that the chief judge resign for being too soft on Mr. Hussein, who has threatened to "crush the heads" of his accusers, Reuters reported.

Mr. Mohammed's testimony was detailed in pool reports by journalists inside the courtroom in Baghdad.

"I am sitting here in this court, with the blind eyes and the burned body, to provide it with scientific and medical evidence," said Mr. Mohammed, who added that he was a peshmerga guerrilla fighting the Iraqi army when his group retreated to the mountains in April 1988.

"It was so fast, we were shocked," he said of the attack that burned him. "The rockets did not explode, they just broke. One hit close to me. When it broke, the chemical inside it covered me. It was a liquid, not a gas.

"I was in pain. There was severe pain, as if there was a high pressure on me, or as if I was touching an electric current, or as if boiling water was being poured on my body. There are feelings you cannot describe to the people around you, even your loved ones."

Mr. Hussein and six other former high-ranking officials in his government are charged with ordering chemical-weapons attacks in the 1988 military campaign to eliminate the Kurds from the mountainous regions in Iraq's northeast. He and his co-defendants maintain that Iraqi troops were trying to suppress Iranian-backed rebel militias in the area, not to exterminate Kurds.

Prosecutors have charged that the campaign, which Mr. Hussein's government code-named Anfal, after a Koranic phrase that refers to "the spoils of war," killed at least 50,000 Kurds and destroyed some 2,000 villages between February and September 1988. Many Iraqi Kurds, though, believe the attacks actually killed more than 150,000 people.

In a separate trial that began last October, Mr. Hussein and seven codefendants are charged with killing 148 men and boys from the Shiite village of Dujail. A five-judge panel is expected to deliver a verdict in that case in November.

In previous testimony in the Anfal trial, which began in August, witnesses described watching bombs explode above the ground and spew green or black smoke that smelled of garlic or rotten fruit, in addition to the conventional bombs and fiery napalm canisters dropped on villages from Iraqi military jets and helicopters.

Burn scars were visible on Mr. Mohammed's right hand as he gave testimony today; he said that the scars covered much of his body. He paused at one point during the court session to douse his eyes with drops of medicine.

"I do not know how long it lasted," he said of the attack, "but then I stood up and saw the people with whom I had been together. They were in front of me. I saw people without their heads, I saw legs and arms. I saw parts of the body of my beloved friends. I called to a friend of mine and he came to me. I asked him for a mirror and asked him to bring me a first-aid kit. I looked at my eyes and they were terribly red. I was suffering from terrible pain."

Mr. Mohammed, a native of the city of Suleimania who was born in 1964, spoke in Kurdish, and his remarks were translated into Arabic for the court. At the time of the attack he described, he was a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of the main Kurdish rebel groups.

Mr. Mohammed said that after he was injured, he was given atropine injections by a doctor and was then taken to the Iranian border, where he was assisted by Iranian Kurds. He said he fell unconscious for several days and woke up in a hospital in Tehran with burns from "my chest to my legs."

"My eyes were swollen," he said. "I could not tolerate any light."

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