

Dictator Who Ruled Iraq with Violence is Hanged for Crimes against Humanity

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BAGHDAD, Saturday — Saddam Hussein, the dictator who led Iraq through three decades of brutality, war and bombast before American forces chased him from his capital city and captured him in a filthy pit near his hometown, was hanged just before dawn Saturday during the morning call to prayer.

The final stages for Mr. Hussein, 69, came with terrible swiftness after he lost the appeal, five days ago, of his death sentence for the killings of 148 men and boys in the northern town of Dujail in 1982. He had received the sentence less than two months before from a special court set up to judge his reign as the almost unchallenged dictator of Iraq.

His execution at 6:10 a.m. was announced on state-run Iraqiya television. Witnesses said 14 Iraqi officials had attended the hanging, at the former military intelligence building in northern Baghdad, now part of an American base. Those in the room said that Mr. Hussein was dressed entirely in black and carrying a Koran and that he was compliant as the noose was draped around his neck.

“He just gave up,” said Mowaffak al-Rubaie, Iraq’s national security adviser. “We were astonished. It was strange. He just gave up.”

He added: “Saddam Hussein is gone. All Iraqis will look to the future after the end of this era.”

At President Bush’s ranch in Crawford, Tex., a White House spokesman, Scott Stanzel, said Mr. Bush had gone to bed before the execution took place and was not awakened. Mr. Bush had received a briefing from his national security adviser Friday afternoon, when he learned the execution would be carried out within hours, Mr. Stanzel said. Asked why Mr. Bush had gone to sleep before hearing the news, he said Mr. Bush “knew that it was going to happen.”

In a statement written in advance, Mr. Bush said Mr. Hussein “was executed after receiving a fair trial — the kind of justice he denied the victims of his brutal regime.”

“Saddam Hussein’s execution comes at the end of a difficult year for the Iraqi people and for our troops,” Mr. Bush said. “Bringing Saddam Hussein to justice will not end the violence in Iraq, but it is an important milestone on Iraq’s course to becoming a democracy that can govern, sustain and defend itself, and be an ally in the war on terror.”

There were conflicting accounts about whether two of Mr. Hussein’s co-defendants were also hanged. The Iraqi state television said the co-defendants, Mr. Hussein’s half-brother

Barzan Ibrahim, and Awad Hamed al-Bandar, the former chief justice of the Revolutionary Court, were hanged after Mr. Hussein. But Mr. Rubaie could not confirm this.

Concerned that the execution could incite violence, United States forces were placed on stepped-up alert and Iraqi officials suggested that the daily curfews here might be extended throughout the weekend. Even as the executions appeared inevitable, many were skeptical or disbelieving that the noose could drop around Mr. Hussein's neck so soon. One Western official said that some of the American legal advisers working on the case appeared stunned at the hasty pace of events late Friday as they walked through the corridors of the Republican Palace, once Mr. Hussein's grandiose center of power.

When Mr. Hussein came to power three years before the Dujail killings, he ruled over an oil-rich country that was an economic and technical powerhouse in the Middle East with rising cultural and political influence. When he hurtled through the trap door of the gallows Saturday morning, the nation he left behind was a smashed and traumatized remnant, desperately trying to restore its own identity and its place in the world.

In between, Mr. Hussein invaded Iran and Kuwait in wars that cost over a million lives and left his military in a shambles, brutally suppressed a Shiite uprising in the south and saw his country become isolated and impoverished under the weight of United Nations-imposed sanctions. Finally, he was ousted by an American-led invasion force in 2003 and the country fell into a new round of internal violence as the rule of law disintegrated and the Western invaders proved unable to control a country in the aftermath of totalitarian rule.

Those developments, so unwelcome to the Americans who so easily conquered this nation, showed that Mr. Hussein was also a unifying force whose painful grip held together Iraq's many ethnicities and sects. Now, three years after his fall, Iraq has descended further into chaos.

As Iraqis across the country were trying to process the scope of what had happened, early reactions mirrored the deep sectarian divide that has been driving much of that violence and threatens to pull the country apart.

"Today is the best day we have seen since the fall of Saddam's regime," said Ayad Jamal al-Deen, a moderate Shiite political leader. "The death of this man will help to release many Baathists from Saddam's mafia. The violence will be reduced."

But a Sunni tribal sheik expressed a thought typical of the hard-line Sunni minority, which has held tenaciously to the memory of being favored under Mr. Hussein.

"The execution of Saddam means that the flame of vengeance will be ignited and it will hurt the body of Iraq with unrecoverable wound," the sheik said.

Mr. Hussein, in handcuffs, was given to the Iraqis by American troops. The Iraqis led him from his cell to a judge's chamber and then to an execution room, a bare unadorned concrete room, according to a witness. It was only a few short steps up the gallows. As the rope was placed around his neck, Mr. Hussein turned to Mr. Rubaie. "He told me, don't be afraid," he recounted. "There was a conversation with him." He did not elaborate. He asked that his Koran be given to someone. Mr. Rubaie took note of the person's name. Iraqis have Mr. Hussein's body but they have not agreed upon a place for burial.

As Mr. Hussein awaited the hangman, he was apparently unaware that the American military was already making plans to dispose of his personal effects.

Iraqi officials were vague to the end about when the execution would happen. "We will do it very soon," said Munir Haddad, a judge on the Iraqi High Tribunal who represented the body at the execution.

Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki was still conferring with American officials late Friday night to work out the timing and resolve key details, like what to do with Mr. Hussein's body, a Western official said.

But Mr. Maliki's comments on Friday to the families of people who were killed while Mr. Hussein ruled left no doubt about where the prime minister stood on the time frame of the execution.

"Anyone who rejects the execution of Saddam is undermining the martyrs of Iraq and their dignity," Mr. Maliki said. "Nobody can overrule the execution sentence issued against Saddam."

Without specifying a time, date or place, he said, "There is no review or delay in implementing the execution verdict against Saddam."

Esam al-Gazawi, another lawyer representing Mr. Hussein who is currently in Jordan, expressed the views of many by suggesting that the timing of the execution was determined by the highest levels of the American and Iraqi governments.

"No one knows when it's going to happen except God and President Bush," he said shortly before Mr. Hussein was executed.

Mr. Hussein spent his final hours in a dreary cell on an American base near the Baghdad airport, and there were indications that he was unaware that the end was drawing near.

Iraqi and American officials kept outsiders, including his legal team, from contacting him all day, according to Najib al-Nauimi, one of Mr. Hussein's lawyers, who was in Qatar.

But the legal team received a request late Friday asking for formal requests from people who could receive Mr. Hussein's effects, another of his lawyers said.

“I gave them a request that my colleagues and I are authorized to get Saddam’s personal stuff,” said the lawyer, Wadood Fawzi.

In Washington, a United States District Court rejected an emergency motion filed Friday afternoon by lawyers for Mr. Hussein seeking to halt the execution on the grounds that it would interfere with pending civil litigations against him. Judge Kathleen Kollar-Kotelly ruled shortly after 9 p.m. that her court did not have jurisdiction to intercede.

Mr. Hussein’s trial and conviction have been mostly welcomed by the Iraqi Shiites and Kurds who suffered under his rule, but it has angered Sunni Muslims, helped to fuel a Sunni-led insurgency and done nothing to calm the increasingly chaotic sectarian violence here.

Iraqi officials said the execution would be filmed, both for the historical record and as proof for those who may doubt the word of both the Americans and Iraqis.

As of late Friday, some Iraqi officials remained engaged in a heated debate about how swiftly to carry out Mr. Hussein’s death sentence.

An Iraqi official close to the negotiations expressed deep disappointment that, after years of forensic investigation, detailed litigation and careful deliberation, the process could be compromised in the final hours by politically driven haste.

“According to the law, no execution can be carried out during the holidays” said another official, “After all the hard work we have done, why would we break the law and ruin what we have built?”

The Muslim holiday of Id al-Adha begins Saturday for Sunnis and Sunday for Shiites, who now control the government.

Iraqi law seemed to indicate that executions were forbidden on the holiday.

But Judge Haddad was dismissive of those concerns, injecting some of the sectarian split that is pervading the country. “The official Id in Iraq is Sunday,” he said.

As for Mr. Hussein’s sect, he said, “Saddam is not Sunni. And he is not Shiite. He is not Muslim.”

Mr. Gazawi, the lawyer, said he was told that Mr. Hussein had met with two half-brothers, who are also in custody, but no other relatives.

“His sons are dead, and his daughters are here in Amman,” he said. Mr. Hussein’s two sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed by American soldiers after the 2003 invasion.

After his government collapsed, Mr. Hussein went into hiding and was eventually found in a hide-out near his hometown of Tikrit.

Once in custody, there were three cases brought against Mr. Hussein for crimes against humanity.

The first case to begin hearings, and the simplest in terms of details, involved the executions of residents of Dujail after an attack on his motorcade there. Mr. Hussein was found guilty on Nov. 5 and sentenced to die by hanging. An appeals court upheld the ruling on Tuesday and said the sentence had to be carried out within 30 days.

A trial on the far more sweeping charges that he directed the killing of 50,000 Kurds in an organized ethnic-cleansing campaign is still under way and will continue despite Mr. Hussein's execution.

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