

Hussein, co-defendants ejected in rowdy session

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From Peter Morris

CNN

BAGHDAD, Iraq (CNN) -- The chief judge in the genocide trial of Saddam Hussein ejected the former Iraqi leader and his co-defendants in a stormy session Tuesday morning.

The confrontation began as two other defendants cross-examined the day's first prosecution witness, a Kurdish woman. She had testified about being removed from her village and sent to a series of detention camps, while men from her village were sent away and never returned. She also said the village was destroyed.

After two hours of questioning from the prosecution, defendants Saber Abdel Aziz and Ali Hassan al-Majeed, also known as Chemical Ali, began to cross-examine the witness about where she had been taken.

During cross-examination, the witness seemed to indicate that some statements attributed to her in the formal complaint were not made to the investigating judge.

Chief Judge Mohammad Orabi Majeed al-Khalefa was apparently unwilling to forward all of the cross-examination questions, sparking protest from the defendants.

Hussein stood up and quoted a verse from the Quran, prompting the judge to eject him. He was escorted out of the courtroom and left calmly.

The remaining defendants rose in protest and began to argue with the judge. One of the defendants, Hussein Rashid, had to be physically restrained and was himself ejected.

Eventually the remaining five co-defendants were also ejected and did not return for the afternoon session.

A curtain closed the rest of the morning session to reporters, preventing the media from seeing what, if anything, transpired next.

At least three more prosecution witnesses testified during the afternoon session before proceedings adjourned for the day. The trial is expected to continue on Wednesday against a backdrop of violence plaguing the country.

On Tuesday, two blasts hit the southern Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, killing 11 people, and authorities found dozens of bodies believed to be the victims of sectarian attacks, scattered throughout the capital. (Full story)

The current phase of the genocide trial includes testimony from prosecution witnesses for the purpose of establishing the context of the prosecution's case, not the links between the defendants and alleged crimes.

Much of the recent testimony would be considered hearsay in U.S. courts and not be admitted as evidence.

On Monday, a former female prisoner testified that prison guards under Hussein buried detainees alive and watched women as they bathed, occasionally shooting over their heads. (Full story)

Hussein and his six co-defendants have repeatedly clashed with al-Khalefa, who ejected all of them from the courtroom during proceedings September 26.

Al-Khalefa was inserted as chief judge in late September after the Iraqi government decided to remove former Chief Judge Abdullah al-Almiri, following his comment in court that Hussein was not a dictator. That comment was deemed to be sympathetic to the defendant and the government ruled al-Almiri was not sufficiently impartial.

The defendants have been on trial since August 21 for a crackdown on Kurdish guerrillas in the late 1980s. About 180,000 people, mostly civilians, died in poison gas attacks against Kurdish towns and villages in northern Iraq, according to the prosecution.

Hussein could face execution if convicted.

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