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Iraqi Court Releases Video of a Much Subdued Hussein

By JOHN F. BURNS

BAGHDAD, Iraq, June 13 - The Iraqi court trying Saddam Hussein and his top aides released a videotape on Monday showing a subdued, contemplative and seemingly compliant Mr. Hussein being questioned Sunday about mass executions ordered after he had survived an assassination attempt in 1982.

The two-minute recording, without sound, appeared to show a strikingly different Mr. Hussein than the defiant figure whose only court appearance, last July, featured lengthy self-justifications and mockery for the judge, Raid Juhi, 35. Then, after an anxious start when he appeared to fear he might be summarily shot, it was Mr. Hussein who dominated the court, with hectoring rebukes for Mr. Juhi for serving his "American masters" and for having the temerity to sit in judgment on the man who had appointed him a judge.

But in the video excerpt it is the judge, Mr. Juhi, who appears to set the tone. Mr. Hussein is shown responding quietly, after careful thought, and glancing sideways at one point to his Iraqi lawyer, Khalil al-Dulaimi, as if for reassurance.

An Iraqi official who was at the three-hour hearing on Sunday, held in a secret location near the Baghdad airport, said Mr. Hussein was restrained and polite throughout, after a stricture from the judge to answer succinctly and not to digress into politics.

In an interview last month with an Arabic newspaper in London, Mr. Juhi said Mr. Hussein, who has been kept in solitary confinement by the American military since his capture in December 2003, had "suffered a collapse in morale because he understands the extent of the charges against him." Mr. Dulaimi later denied that claim.

Whatever the cause for Mr. Hussein's change, the video showed him shorn of the scornfulness of last July.

Officials said the questioning on Sunday focused on the executions of 143 men in Dujail, 50 miles north of Baghdad. The killings were ordered after an assassination attempt against Mr. Hussein there in 1982. Tribunal officials said Mr. Hussein was one of several men summoned Sunday for questioning about the killings, including two of his half brothers and Taha Yassin Ramadan, one of his former vice presidents.

While listening patiently to Mr. Juhi's questions, Mr. Hussein cocked his head pensively to one side, stroked his beard, cupped his hand over his mouth, knitted and unknitted his fingers, and looked alternately reflective, disconsolate and resigned.

What was relatively unchanged was his physical appearance.

As in July, he seemed shrunken since the days when aides cowered before him in his palaces - at least 30 pounds lighter, his face tightly drawn, deep pouches beneath his eyes, his beard flecked

with white, but his hair still black from the hair dye Iraqi officials have said is one of the few luxuries permitted him in jail.

Once a man who prided himself on his immaculate tailoring, he wore, again, the same kind of ill-fitting suit provided by his American captors last year. There are new indications of behind-the-scenes strains at the Iraqi Special Tribunal. American officials who help guide the tribunal have shown unease over statements by senior Iraqi officials that Mr. Hussein will be put on trial within the next two or three months, and they have cautioned against a trial without the necessary legal groundwork.

On Monday, an official who has been briefed on the court's workings sought to discourage expectations of an early trial, contacting The New York Times by e-mail and insisting that there had been no decision yet on the timing of the proceedings and that Mr. Hussein had not yet been formally accused in the Dujail killings.

Senior Iraqi officials within the tribunal have said Mr. Hussein will be added to five defendants already charged in the Dujail killings, for a trial, the tribunal's first, that will start in late summer or early fall. Under Iraq's legal system, the kind of questioning shown on the videotape is required before the judge decides whether there is a case to take to trial.

A second tribunal video released Monday showed other top officials from the Hussein era being questioned about other mass killings for which Mr. Hussein is likely to face trial, including the use of poison gas on scores of Kurdish villages in the late 1980's, and the suppression of a Shiite rebellion in 1991 in which an estimated 150,000 men were shot and dumped into mass graves.

Further stresses within the tribunal appeared unavoidable on Monday after Ahmad Chalabi, a deputy prime minister, said in an interview on the satellite network Al Arabiya that the government was preparing legislation to re-cast the tribunal as a solely Iraqi court. At present, the tribunal's legal authority stems from a decree passed last year by the American occupation authority.

Critics of the tribunal, including Mr. Hussein's defense lawyers, have cited this, among other reasons, as grounds for questioning the tribunal's basis in law.

Mr. Chalabi, a Shiite who returned from exile two years ago as a Pentagon favorite but then broke with American officials, also said he favored purging the tribunal of what he described as "Baathist elements" he said had taken over under the former interim government of Ayad Allawi, which ended in early May.

That appeared to set the stage for the ouster of some top tribunal officials, and, simultaneously, an attempt to vindicate Salem Chalabi, Mr. Chalabi's nephew, who was dismissed as the court's executive director by the Allawi government.

The disputes occurred against a backdrop of continuing violence, with more than 50 deaths reported Monday. Most were accounted for by police announcements that they had discovered 28 bullet-riddled bodies buried in shallow graves or along streets in Baghdad, many thought to

be Sunni Arabs caught up in a wave of sectarian violence, and 17 bodies in Habbaniya, a predominantly Sunni town near Falluja.

In Baghdad, a suicide car bomb aimed at an American convoy in the Yarmouk district killed two Iraqi policemen and a 12-year-old girl, Athra Zughair, the daughter of a guard at a nearby school.

In three other suicide bombings on Monday, an Iraqi soldier was killed in Radwaniya, in western Baghdad; three Iraqi policemen died in Samarra, 60 miles north of Baghdad; and two Iraqi policemen were killed in Tikrit, the police said.