

Saddam trial: 'We heard screaming and gunfire'

Paul Schemm | Baghdad, Iraq

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Saddam Hussein's troops drove truckloads of terrified Kurdish villagers into the desert and gunned them down by the hundreds, a witness told the ousted Iraqi leader's genocide trial on Wednesday.

After managing to escape, the detainee ran off through the night and fell into a ditch of the recently killed, in the middle of a vast field of burial mounds left behind by a systematic slaughter, he told the court.

Wednesday's testimony was the first eye-witness account of mass graves during Saddam's 1988 "Anfal" campaign against Iraq's Kurdish minority, during which prosecutors allege that 182 000 people were slaughtered.

Speaking anonymously from behind a screen, a Kurdish man began the now familiar tale of how his village was destroyed and he ended up in a brutal prison camp, while the judge chided him to get to the point of his testimony.

Then the witness described how he and his fellow camp inmates were driven to the desert in stinking trucks, stained with urine and faeces.

"It was an unpaved road. Our vehicle got stuck in the sand and couldn't move any more. It got bogged down deep in the sand and we heard gunfire. It wasn't that close, it was far from us, but we heard screaming and gunfire," he said.

"Then it was dark, and they brought a group of people in front of a vehicle. The drivers got out of our vehicles and turned on the headlights, put three lines or four lines of people in front of our vehicle and opened fire.

"A detainee called Anwar said: 'Say the Shahada [Muslim declaration of faith], and ask for forgiveness. We are going to die in minutes, it is forgiveness time for people who are going to die'," he said.

The prisoner struggled with the guards and shooting broke out.

The witness ran away: "I fled from the shooting and I fell into a ditch and it was full of bodies. I fell on a body, he was still alive, it was his last breath.

"I took off my clothes because I thought no one could see me with no clothes. I saw light in the distance and ran towards the lights. As I was running I saw many pits, I saw many hills," the court heard.

"I saw people who had been shot. The desert was full of mounds that all had people buried underneath," he said.

Saddam's trial restarted on Wednesday without his defence lawyers, despite an agreement that they would end their boycott and return to the hearings.

Saddam and six co-defendants were still represented by court-appointed counsel as the hearing resumed, although Judge Mohammed al-Oreibi al-Khalifah told the court that if the original team turned up it could come back to court.

For the past month, the defence has boycotted the trial in protest at alleged interference by the Iraqi government, while the defendants' noisy protests have often seen them expelled from the dock.

But on Tuesday, the accused asked for permission to bring their lawyers back to the Iraqi High Tribunal and this was granted by the court.

Previous witnesses in the case have told of how hundreds of their fellow camp inmates died of hunger or disease or were raped and murdered by camp guards, while prosecutors have shown identity papers found in mass graves.

The former Iraqi president and his co-defendants insist the operation was a legitimate military campaign against separatist guerrillas and fighters who sided with Iran, with which Iraq was at war during the 1980s.

Saddam and his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, a former military commander who became notorious for anti-Kurd gas attacks as "Chemical Ali," are accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The five others are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, and all seven accused face the death penalty if convicted.

The Iraqi High Tribunal has also set a date of November 5 for the verdict in Saddam's earlier trial for crimes against humanity in the devastation of the Shi'ite village of Dujail and the killing of 148 villagers in the 1980s. –AFP

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