

Hussein Goes on Trial for Crimes Against Humanity

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BAGHDAD, [Iraq](#), Oct. 19 - [Saddam Hussein](#) defiantly faced Iraqi judges today in a heavily guarded courthouse in central Baghdad, as he pleaded not guilty to charges for mass executions in 1982. The trial marked the beginning of a long process of public reckoning for the decades of brutal repression that Mr. Hussein had brought to Iraq.

A live-television feed showed a silver-haired judge in black robes sitting upright, often jousting verbally with Mr. Hussein and seven other defendants over the legitimacy of the court and the crimes in question. The former Iraqi leader and the others sat in three rows of chairs, surrounded by barriers of white metal bars.

Mr. Hussein, 68, who had been escorted into the courtroom by guards in body armor, wore a dark gray suit and white shirt, his eyes moist and his hair neatly combed back. He sat in the first row facing the judge and next to the balding, white-robed Awad Hamad al-Bandar, the former head of the Revolutionary Court.

Midway through the session, the judge, a Kurd named Rizgar Muhammad Amin, read the charges, which included murder and torture. That prompted Mr. Hussein and his co-defendants to plead "not guilty." The judge later adjourned the trial to Nov. 28, after the session today that started shortly after noon and lasted several hours.

Mr. Hussein's strong-willed attitude, the same one that helped propel him to the ranks of the modern world's most feared dictators, became evident from the start of the trial, when the judge asked Mr. Hussein to take the stand first.

Mr. Hussein got up from his chair and walked to the podium holding a thick hardcover copy of the Koran. The court room fell silent.

"By the name of God," he said, beginning to recite a holy verse. The judge asked Mr. Hussein to say his full name. The exchange abruptly turned combative, with Mr. Hussein refusing to obey and instead launching into short criticisms of the immediate restrictions on him, such as an order preventing his lawyers from bringing pens and paper into the courtroom.

"Are you judges?" Mr. Hussein asked at one point. A minute or so later, he said: "I've been wearing my best clothes and waiting for the court since 9 a.m."

The judge persisted: "Give us your full name."

"You know me, because you are an Iraqi," Mr. Hussein said, adding, "I don't recognize the parties that appointed you to this court."

"So you won't give us your name?" the judge said. "Sit down."

The first case being brought against the former Iraqi leader focuses on the execution of more than 140 men and teenage boys from the mostly Shiite market town of Dujail, 35 miles north of Baghdad. The victims were seized by secret police after a failed assassination attempt on Mr. Hussein there in 1982. This morning, images on one Iraqi television network showed residents of Dujail calling for Mr. Hussein's execution.

Meanwhile, in Mr. Hussein's home town of Tikrit crowds gathered to show support for their former leader, chanting slogans such as: "You are still the son of Iraq." They appeared to be in a frenzy, waving Iraqi flags and photos of Mr. Hussein. Iraqi police, wearing blue uniforms and carrying Kalashnikovs, walked through the crowds but did not appear anxious to break up the demonstration.

This morning, officials from the Iraqi special tribunal and human rights observers from international organizations had gathered near the convention center inside the fortified Green Zone to await transport to the courthouse as American helicopters swooped overhead in a wan sky. The Iraqi officials included Raad Juhi, the judge who has been leading the investigations into Mr. Hussein.

Though the case against Mr. Hussein is relatively narrow, it is the first in a series meant to serve as a public accounting for all the acts of murder and torture that took place under his rule. He first became a senior member of government following the Baath Party coup of 1968, then seized full power and went on to construct one of the most thoroughly autocratic regimes of the late 20th century. Mr. Hussein was not toppled from power until the American-led invasion in the spring of 2003, which sent him fleeing from his marble-lined palaces in Baghdad to the palm groves and villages of the north.

In December that year, American troops dragged an emaciated Mr. Hussein from a spider hole near Tikrit in the northern Sunni triangle, catalyzing the events that would lead the trial today.

Even as this trial began, investigative judges in the Iraqi special tribunal were working to conclude their research in more far-reaching cases that would reflect, to a much greater degree, the horrors of Mr. Hussein's rule. These include the Anfal campaign against the Kurds in the late 1980's, which resulted in the deaths of at least 80,000 people, and the suppression of the 1991 Shiite revolt, in which more than 100,000 people were killed in a three-week frenzy of bloodletting. In all, Mr. Hussein could face charges for the killings of more than 300,000 people, mostly Shiites and Kurds.

That figure does not include the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who lost their lives in the disastrous eight-year war against [Iran](#) and the ill-fated invasion of [Kuwait](#).

The television feed from the courtroom, housed in the former Baath Party headquarters, was set up with a 20-minute delay so officials can censure any sensitive images or testimony.

The tribunal, working under the advisement of Americans in what is known as the Regime Crimes Liaison Office, first announced the Dujail case early this year, though it did not make any mention of Mr. Hussein being among the defendants. Mr. Hussein was only added to the list over the summer, a move that came about because the current embattled Shiite-run government, under the watch of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, pressed the tribunal, nominally independent, to ensure the speedy appearance of Mr. Hussein in the courtroom.

That has opened the tribunal up to intense criticism from Western human rights groups, who accuse the judges of being political pawns and of flouting international standards of fair justice. Few legal organizations outside of Iraq and the [United States](#) accept the trial as anything more than a display of "victor's justice." Both Human Rights Watch and the International Center for Transitional Justice, respected groups based in New York, issued statements this month condemning the shoddy research and shaky legal framework that form the backbone of the trial, apparently pieced together for expediency's sake.

Much of the international criticism also centers around the fact that Mr. Hussein and his aides could be sentenced to death for their crimes. The first American viceroy to Iraq, [L. Paul Bremer III](#), banned executions. Last year, following the transfer of sovereignty, Ayad Allawi, the American appointee as interim prime minister and an ex-operative for the Central Intelligence Agency, reinstated capital punishment.

Under the current law, the president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, a former Kurdish militia leader, has to approve any executions. In the past, Mr. Talabani joined a group of international lawyers in denouncing the death penalty, but has recently allowed his deputies to sign warrants of execution. Several cases involving the death sentence are working their way now through the Iraqi legal system, and Mr. Talabani recently said that "Saddam should be executed 20 times" for the Anfal massacres.

The other defendants who took the stand today included Barzan al-Tikriti, Mr. Hussein's half-brother and a former intelligence chief; Taha Yasin Ramadan, former deputy prime minister and later vice president; and Mr. Bandar, the former chief judge of the Revolutionary Court. All three men are known to Iraqis as being among the most ruthless members of the old regime. Each is accused of playing a decisive role in the Dujail massacre.

The American government has tried to portray itself as working in a purely advisory capacity, but has been at the forefront of several crucial elements of the trial. For one thing, it has provided \$138 million to build, over the course of a year, the state-of-the-art courthouse that sits at the heart of the fortified Green Zone, which also contains the American embassy and the headquarters of the Iraqi government. Members of the Regime Crimes Liaison Office, attached to the embassy, have thoroughly aided the investigatory process, including overseeing excavations of mass graves.

The Dujail killings began after a small group of villagers attacked a convoy carrying Mr. Hussein on July 8, 1982. Mr. Hussein was flown by helicopter from the area right after the assault. Members of the intelligence services, overseen by Mr. Tikriti at the time, then descended on the village and began rounding up men. Within days, hundreds had been arrested and as many as 15 were executed immediately, with more deaths to follow.

In the end, up to 1,500 people spent years in prison with no trials or charges brought against them, many moved scattered to remote detention centers around the country. A committee formed by Mr. Ramadan razed the date palm plantations and fruit groves surrounding Dujail, destroying the livelihoods of the residents. Last winter, two local Baath Party officials were arrested in connection with the case and also forced to face the same charges as Mr. Hussein.

On Tuesday, an Internet posting in the name of the Baath Party appeared on a Web site that often carries pro-insurgent messages. The posting condemned the trial as illegitimate and said Mr. Hussein will take the opportunity to judge the Americans and their allies.

"The dear leader Saddam Hussein Al-Majeed will stand on the 19th of this month with glory, truth, and defiance, as a struggling leader and a jihadist resistor, and as a patriotic Iraqi and an Arab nationalist," the message said. "He will stand as a representative of all dignified Iraqis and free Arabs, and of honest humanity. He will prosecute, expose and convict American imperialism and the vicious Zionist coalition."