

August 23, 2006

Kurdish Woman Curses Saddam for Chemical Attack

By Reuters

BAGHDAD—Cursing Saddam Hussein, a Kurdish woman told the former Iraqi leader's genocide trial on Wednesday she was horribly burned after aircraft bombed her mountain village with chemical weapons.

“I lost my sight. My children lost their sight ... My house was razed to the ground. May God blind them all,” said Adiba Owla Bayez, pointing at the former Iraqi president and his six co-defendants on the third day of the trial.

The court later declared a three-week adjournment.

Describing a spring evening in 1987, Bayez, a 45-year-old mother of five, said aircraft dropped bombs behind her house and she had immediately noticed a difference from previous attacks.

“We smelt a peculiar smell. It was rotten apple ... My daughter Nargis said she had pain in the stomach and in her eyes. She was vomiting. All my children were vomiting. I too felt like that and started vomiting,” Bayez said.

The testimony was of events on April 16, 1987, nearly a year before the formal launch of the Anfal—Spoils of War—campaign in the Balisan valley, north of Sulaimaniya.

Saddam and his cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid, are charged with genocide over the seven-month operation. Majid earned his nickname “Chemical Ali” after poison gas attacks in the north.

The other defendants, who argue the attacks were legitimate military strikes against Iraqi Kurds fighting with Iran against the regime in Baghdad, are accused of war crimes. Both charges carry a maximum penalty of death by hanging.

Arm-in-Arm

Moussa Abdullah Moussa, a former Kurdish peshmerga fighter who was in his village on August 25, 1988, when it was gassed, appeared later in the session, telling the court how families had perished in each other's arms.

“I found my brother, Saleh Abdullah and his son Shaabaan. They were 100

meters (yards) away. They were hugging and they were dead," he said. "I can't describe the feeling which I felt with my eyes and heart. We screamed."

Birds and chickens collapsed gasping, blood trickling from their beaks, and villagers plunged their faces into milk to ease the agony of the stinging chemicals, Moussa recalled. With the village surrounded by Saddam's troops, he gave up hope.

"People were certain they were going to die because the government had no mercy."

Moussa spoke after the cross-examination of the day's second witness, a Kurdish woman called Bahiya Mahmoud who lost eight family members, yielded a rare moment of levity during the otherwise grim proceedings.

Asked if she cooked with garlic, a defense lawyer reduced one of the prosecutors and Majid to outright laughter—and even drew a flicker of a smile from Saddam—by suggesting it was her kitchen, rather than any bombs, that she had smelled.

On Monday, Saddam refused to plead and called the court a tool of the U.S. occupation. The Shi'ite judge entered a not guilty plea on behalf of him and Majid, who also refused to enter a plea.

Wednesday's court decision to halt proceedings until Sept 11 followed a pattern established during Saddam's first trial, for crimes against humanity over the killing of 148 Shi'ite men from Dujail, which was frequently adjourned for short pauses.

Unlike many witnesses in the Dujail case, none of those who have spoken so far have bothered to conceal their identity from the man who ruled Iraq through fear for three decades.

At least one defense lawyer has used a voice-distorting microphone and avoided appearing on television.

Three defense counsel in the Dujail trial have been killed, prompting critics to say a fair trial is impossible amid the sectarian and ethnic bloodshed ravaging Iraq.

A verdict in the Dujail trial is expected in October. Saddam faces the death penalty in both cases.

The New York Times Company