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Hussein's Lawyers Sever Contact With Court

By REUTERS

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RAMADI, [Iraq](#) (Reuters) - Lawyers for [Saddam Hussein](#) and his aides severed all contact with the court trying the former Iraqi president on Wednesday after the second killing of a member of the defense team since the trial began last month.

The judge said the court was considering its response.

But the prime minister made clear he would not heed calls to move the trial abroad. Hinting Saddam's own followers had a hand in the killings, he said lawyers had refused police protection.

The attorneys representing Saddam and seven co-accused on charges of crimes against humanity considered a second day of hearings set for November 28 to be "canceled and illegitimate," lead counsel Khalil al-Dulaimi told Reuters.

Speaking in the Sunni Arab rebel stronghold of Ramadi, Dulaimi said he felt personally threatened. Many of Saddam's fellow minority Sunnis accuse the Shi'ite-led government of condoning militia death squads gunning for the old regime.

Dulaimi renewed demands for the United Nations to halt the trial after Tuesday's killing of Adil al-Zubeidi, who defended Saddam's half-brother Barzan and the former vice president.

Judge Rizgar Amin, who presides over a panel of five trial judges, told Reuters they had yet to decide how to respond to the problem: "Now is the time to sit and talk and discuss this among ourselves so we can reach a decision in the coming days."

It was for the government to protect the lawyers, he said.

Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari said they had turned down an offer of protection from the Interior Ministry. The killers of Saadoun al-Janabi, counsel for another co-defendant, told witnesses they were from that ministry before abducting and shooting him the day after the trial opened on October 19.

"I hope they will cooperate with us now," Jaafari told reporters. He said Saddam supporters were exploiting the deaths: "If you seek the cause ... seek him who benefits," he added.

"U.S. RESPONSIBILITY"

"We're facing daily threats," said Dulaimi after the defense team issued a statement blaming the U.S. occupying forces and the government for failing to provide security for them.

``We call on the international community, the U.N. Security Council, the United States and all those involved to work on scrapping the criminal court as illegitimate, and also to pressure it to release President Saddam Hussein," he said.

The attack renewed international concern about whether the trial can be held in Iraq amid the sectarian violence. However, U.S. officials involved in the trial process have backed the government in saying Iraqis themselves should judge Saddam.

Washington does not support the new International Criminal Court established for such cases at The Hague since 2002.

U.N. Secretary-General [Kofi Annan](#) said the attacks undermined efforts to uphold the rule of law: ``It is vitally important that the security of all involved with the tribunal should be equally assured to ensure a trial free from intimidation and coercion," he said through his spokeswoman.

The present trial concerns the killing of 148 Shi'ite men from the town of Dujail after a failed assassination attempt in 1982. Other trials for genocide are expected to follow. Saddam faces death by hanging if convicted in any one of them.

It was unclear what effect a defense boycott would have on the tribunal, which has the power to appoint counsel. However it would clearly dent efforts by the Iraqi and U.S. governments to show that the trial is entirely fair.

Legal sources said that a failure of defense counsel to appear on an appointed date would normally cause an adjournment.

PRIVATE BURIAL

Zubeidi was buried on Wednesday, virtually in secret, police said, by relatives afraid of an attack on any funeral ceremony.

Gunmen shot Zubeidi in his car in Baghdad. Thamer Hamoud al-Khuzai, a fellow member of the defense team, was wounded.

The start of the trial was watched on television by millions of Iraqis -- both assassinated lawyers spoke heatedly -- but supporters of the ousted leader called it ``victors' justice."

In the latest burst of violence, a suicide car bomb in the mixed Shi'ite and Sunni Arab town of Baquba, north of Baghdad, killed seven Iraqi policemen, army and medical sources said.

Late on Wednesday two car bombs near a mosque and a police station in a mainly Shi'ite area of northeast Baghdad killed at least six people and wounded 25 others, police, witnesses and the U.S. military said.

Ahead of a December 15 election, the Arab League has tried to hold a national reconciliation conference. But initial hopes of a conference on November 15 have been scaled down to a "preparatory" meeting in Cairo on November 19, a League official said.

In western Iraq, where U.S. and Iraqi forces have been conducting an offensive since Saturday to clear the small frontier town of Qusayba of al Qaeda militants, the U.S. military declared the main phase of the operation complete.

It said five civilians had been killed during the fighting when U.S. fire destroyed a house being used by insurgents.