

THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

Saddam admits to ordering trial for executed Shiites

Deposed dictator insists action was not criminal, takes sole responsibility

By BASSEM MROUE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

"Where is the crime? Where is the crime?"

So said a defiant Saddam Hussein at the end of Wednesday's hearing in a trial that could send him to the gallows.

In a dramatic speech, the former Iraqi leader told the court that he ordered the trial of 148 Shiites who were eventually executed in the 1980s. He also acknowledged ordering the confisca-

tion and flattening of their palm groves and farms in the town of Dujail.

But he insisted he had the right to do so because the Shiites of Dujail were suspected of trying to assassinate him.

"If trying a suspect accused of shooting at a head of state, no matter what his name is, is considered a crime, then you have the head of state in your hands," Saddam told the judges. "Try him."

The bold testimony came a day after prosecutors presented the most direct evidence against him

in the four-month trial: a 1984 presidential decree approving the death sentences for the 148, with a signature said to be Saddam's.

Saddam did not admit or deny approving their executions but stated outright that he was solely responsible for their prosecution, adding that his seven co-defendants should be released.

"If the chief figure makes things easy for you by saying he was the one responsible, then why are you going after these people?" he said.

The deaths of the Shiites are one of the main charges against the

defendants, who could face execution by hanging — the same fate as most of the 148 — if convicted.

They are on trial also for torture and imprisonment of the Shiites, as well as the razing of their farmlands, in a crackdown launched after a July 8, 1982, assassination attempt against Saddam in Dujail.

The prosecution has argued the imprisonment and executions were illegal, saying the 148 were sentenced to death in an "imaginary trial" before Saddam's Revolutionary Court where the defendants did not even appear.



Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, right, speaks at his trial in Baghdad, Iraq, on Wednesday. The trial is in recess until March 12.



A woman cries after identifying the body of a relative in a Baghdad, Iraq, hospital on Wednesday. Three bombs exploded within an hour in Baghdad, police said. At least 47 people were killed in bombings and shootings.

Leaders agree to seek new Iraqi PM

At least 47 people killed in violence

By ALEXANDER ZAVIS
AND QASSIM ABDULZAHRA
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Key political groups agreed Wednesday to mount a campaign to deny Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari another term in a bid to jump-start stalled talks on a new national unity government.

The move against al-Jaafari is expected to draw sharp opposition from the anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The Shiite leader's support enabled al-Jaafari to win the nomination over Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi by a single vote in a Feb. 12 caucus.

Al-Sadr's militiamen were believed to be behind many of the attacks against Sunni mosques last week, and the prospect of a prime minister in debt to the young radical has alarmed mainstream politicians, including some in the Shiite alliance.

They fear a strong role for al-Sadr could sharpen sectarian tensions that have already pushed the country to the brink of civil war and complicate U.S. plans to begin drawing down American forces this year.

Meanwhile, at least 47 people died in bombings and shootings across the country. In the deadliest attack, a car bomb exploded near a market and traffic police office in a mostly Shiite neighborhood in southeast Baghdad, killing 29 people and wounding 67, the Interior Ministry said.



President Bush, left, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai get ready to cut a ribbon to officially open the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Wednesday. Behind them is U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Bush visited Afghanistan ahead of his trip to India and Pakistan.

Bush makes surprise visit to Afghanistan

On first visit to nation, president vows to catch bin Laden

By TERENCE HUNT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KABUL, Afghanistan

Flying fast and low, U.S. helicopters skimmed just above dusty fields dotted with bombed-out remnants of war. Door-gunners gripped machine guns, watching for any threat from the ground or the air. The mission: Safely ferry President Bush on his surprise visit to boost Afghanistan's fragile democracy.

Violence and suicide bombings are on the rise in Afghanistan, and Bush would be a prized target for al-Qaida and Taliban militants driven into hiding by the U.S.-led invasion. This is the country where Osama bin Laden trained terrorists and plotted the attacks against America on Sept. 11.

Bush seemed unfazed by the security risks as he moved quickly around Kabul for four hours, meeting with President Hamid Karzai, U.S. Embassy workers and coalition forces at Bagram Air Base.

He expressed unwavering confidence that bin Laden will be captured despite years of fruitless manhunts for the elusive terrorist leader who ran training camps in Afghanistan.

Bush ordered Air Force One, on a flight to India, to make a secret detour to this war-scarred country to show U.S. support for the fledgling democracy led by Karzai, whose authority has been weakened by suicide bombings and rising violence by insurgents.



A Secret Service agent stands guard while President Bush greets embassy personnel after he officially opened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Wednesday.

There are more than 18,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and Bush said their mission was "to help this new democracy not only survive but to flourish."

The president, who once boasted bin Laden would be taken dead or alive, said the fugitive terrorist would not elude the United States forever. Bin Laden and

AT A GLANCE

Surprise visit: President Bush unexpectedly visited Afghanistan Wednesday, making a four-hour stop to meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and coalition troops.

Next leg: Bush then moved on to India, where he plans to stay for two days and talk about India's nuclear energy program.

Last stop: The president will go to Pakistan on Friday to meet with President Gen. Pervez Musharraf and discuss the effort to capture Osama bin Laden.

Taliban leader Mullah Omar were driven into hiding by the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan after Sept. 11. They are believed to be in the rugged Pakistan-Afghan border region.

"It's not a matter of if they're captured and brought to justice," Bush said at a news conference with Karzai at the war-worn presidential palace. "It's when they're brought to justice."

Eight weeks in the planning, Bush's visit to Afghanistan was not announced in advance to reduce chances of an assassination attempt. Heavily armed combat-assault teams shadowed Bush's moves.

Door-gunners on at least two helicopters fired a brief burst of bullets down at the dusty flatlands not far from Bagram Air Base as they ferried the president's entourage into town.

A White House official suggested it was test fire.

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