

Dujail Pays for Saddam Verdict

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Residents of Dujail say Sunnis are out to get them, following Saddam's conviction. Saddam Hussein may have been sentenced to death, but the people of Dujail are not at peace.

They have mixed feelings about the conviction of the former dictator and his aides for ordering the mass executions of men from Dujail after a failed assassination attempt against Saddam in 1982.

The predominantly Shia village, 65 kilometres north of Baghdad, is surrounded by Sunni settlements who have vowed to avenge Saddam's conviction, according to Dujail residents.

From the very beginning of the trial last year, local Shia urged the Iraqi government to protect them from possible retaliatory action which had been threatened in the event of Saddam being found guilty in the Dujail trial.

After the verdict, even those who'd lost members of their family in the mass executions did not dare cheer the verdict in public.

Dujail residents say it's now very risky for them to commute to Baghdad. The highway is notorious for abductions and assassinations, but they feel particularly vulnerable because of their village's associations.

Mohammed Jawad, a trader from Dujail, was kidnapped on his way to Baghdad near al-Mishahada, a Sunni village close to the village, only a week before the trial verdict.

Jawad said his abductors accused Shia from Dujail of treachery. When he told them that he is Sunni, they asked him to prove it by praying in front of them. So he did, and they let him go, with a message to deliver to his neighbours.

"They told me to tell them that their judgement day is coming soon and that they will be killed one by one if Saddam is executed," he said.

Whereas Dujail residents privately welcome the conviction of Saddam and his chief aides, they feel ambivalent about that of three local men for assisting Saddam and the Baath party in the aftermath of the failed assassination.

At the special criminal tribunal on November 5, Saddam, his brother-in-law Barzan al-Tikriti, head of Iraqi intelligence in the 1980s, and Awad al-Bandar, head of the Baath revolutionary court, were sentenced to death by hanging, while Taha Yasin Ramadhan, a former Iraqi vice-president, was sentenced to life in prison.

Of four local Ba'ath party members prosecuted in the same trial, Mohammed al-Azawi was acquitted and

Abdullah al-Ruwayid, his son Mizhir and Ali Dayih were each handed 15 year prison sentences.

"We had hoped that those sentenced from Dujail would get only a couple of years," said Jasim al-Khazraji, a hairdresser in the village. "We live together in one village, every day we meet their families, so it is hard for us to see them being sad because their relatives were sentenced for so long."

Another resident, Mahmood al-Janabi, said, "We had hoped those from Dujail would be released because they did more good for residents than harm. We as Dujail people have to forget about the past."

Relatives of the Dujail men tried along with Saddam insist there were no grounds for their prosecution. Ghassan Dayih, son of Ali Dayih, said he was so distressed by his father's conviction that he has not been able to leave his house since the verdict.

"My father is an [innocent] victim, many others were involved in the Dujail incident," he said, but preferred not to go into details because he said he did not want to create problems in the village.

Ghassan's father was an active member of the Baath party in Dujail. Residents describe him as a moderate man. His father, Ghassan's grandfather, was the village mayor in 1982.

According to Ghassan, his father was "only doing his duty" when he provided information to Ba'ath authorities about people the party was looking to interrogate or arrest.

Ghassan recalls how his father was detained. A police patrol came to the village saying they wanted to question him in connection with the Dujail incident. His father agreed to go along with the officers, assuming that they wanted him to provide witness testimony, said Ghassan.

Two months later, he discovered that his father was being held in the heavily fortified green zone in the capital, at which point he hired a lawyer.

"We didn't see my father for more than three months," said Ghassan, who said the authorities eventually permitted him to do so. "I found him sick, weak, tired and pale. My mother and I cried when we saw him. We were so sad and confused that we had no time to ask him how he was doing."

"I vowed that if my husband is released we would start a new life abroad," said Ghassan's mother.

Dhafir al-Ruwayid, son of Abdullha al-Ruwayid, considered the conviction of his father, a senior figure in well-known local tribe, a "political" move. He said his family and tribe are hoping to appeal the sentences handed down to Abdullah and Mizhir.

Meanwhile, Latif al-Azzawi, son of Mohammed al-Azzawi, was relieved that his father was acquitted for lack of evidence. "My father is innocent, and the court has realised that," he said, insisting that the other local men convicted in the Saddam trial should be released as "they are good people who served the region".

Most people here just want to put the past behind them and get on with their lives, with some believing that the trial has just brought them trouble they could have done without.

Ali Ahmed, an engineer from Dujail, said, "All the violence and threats that we've faced are due to the Saddam trial." If the people of Dujail had known this would happen, he went on, they would never have demanded that Saddam be prosecuted for the 1982 killings.

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