

Asia worried about fallout

AFP, Sydney

Key Asian nations said they respected Saddam Hussein's execution yesterday as a legal move by Iraq's new government, but worried that his hanging would worsen the bloodshed in the country.

Even nations that oppose the death penalty, like US ally Australia, called the execution a "heroic" move for the war-torn country.

"I believe there is something quite heroic about a country that is going through the pain and the suffering that Iraq is going through, yet still extends due process to somebody who was a tyrant and brutal suppressor and murderer of his people," Howard said.

"That is the mark of a country that is trying against fearful odds to embrace democracy and it is a country that deserves sympathy and support and not to be abandoned," the prime minister said.

Japan, the other major US ally in the region, said Saddam's execution had been carried out within the rule of law.

"This is a decision made by Iraq's new government on the rule of law," a foreign ministry official said. "We respect it."

Both Australia and Japan contributed forces to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the ouster of Saddam, and Australia still has about 1,300 troops involved in operations in the area.

Japan ended its historic deployment to Iraq in July -- although its air force still provides flights into the country to assist the United Nations and the US-led coalition.

But not all nations heralded the hanging of Hussein.

China, which opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq, avoided direct comment on the execution, state media reported.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said merely that Iraq's affairs should be decided by the Iraqi people when asked about Saddam's hanging early on Saturday morning, Xinhua news agency said.

And Pakistan, a key US ally, described the execution as a "sad event" and expressed hope that it would not further exacerbate the security situation in Iraq.

"The execution of former president Saddam Hussein, which can only be described as a sad event, is another poignant reminder of the violence that continues to grip Iraq," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"We hope that this event would not further exacerbate the security situation," the statement said.

Muslim-majority Malaysia, which currently heads the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, warned the hanging could trigger more violence in Iraq.

"I think there will be repercussions. The only thing is we hope they will be able to contain this. Because the conflict is not going to end. This is not the answer," Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told AFP.

Syed Hamid said there were divisions within the OIC, the world's largest Muslim grouping, on what Saddam's fate should have been.

"There are divided views on it, but on the question of the need for reconciliation to bring the people back together, end violence and bring stability, there is a common feeling," he said.

India, which had warm ties with Saddam's regime, also condemned the execution and worried that it would exacerbate the conflict in Iraq.

Fears the execution could spark terror attacks anywhere on the globe prompted South Korea to order its overseas embassies to boost security, although its government has yet to comment directly on the execution.

South Korea has around 2,300 troops in Iraq at the US's request, making it the third largest foreign contingent there after the United States and Britain.

In Southeast Asia, Thailand and Singapore both said they believed the execution had been carried out in accordance with Iraqi law, but Cambodia said the execution should not have taken place.

Cambodia is still struggling to begin its own long-delayed trials for atrocities committed in the 1970s by the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

"Democracy has grown very much in Iraq, but in the end the death penalty still exists," information minister Khieu Kanharith told AFP.

"We do not support the death penalty, but we support the process of finding justice for the people," he added.

Vietnam's Foreign Affairs Ministry described the execution as "an internal affair of the Iraqi people".

The crimes of Saddam Hussein

The principal atrocities blamed on the regime (1979 - 2003)



AFP 301206



Daughters react with grief

AFP, Amman

Saddam Hussein's two older daughters, who live in Jordan, reacted with grief and stoicism Saturday to news of his hanging, one of the former Iraqi dictator's lawyers in Amman said.

"Raghad Hussein and Rana Hussein gathered together with their nine children (overnight Friday) to wait for news," the lawyer told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Several of Saddam's lawyers were with them at Raghad's residence in the west of the Jordanian capital, where the eldest daughter Raghad was said to have reacted "stoically".

"He was their father, and he was not just any father," the lawyer said. "You can imagine their grief."

Saddam's daughters and their children took refuge in Jordan on July 30, 2003, four months after the US-led invasion that led to their father's downfall.

His widow Sajida and youngest daughter Hala settled in Qatar's capital Doha, while sons Uday and Qusay died in an assault by US troops in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in July 2003.

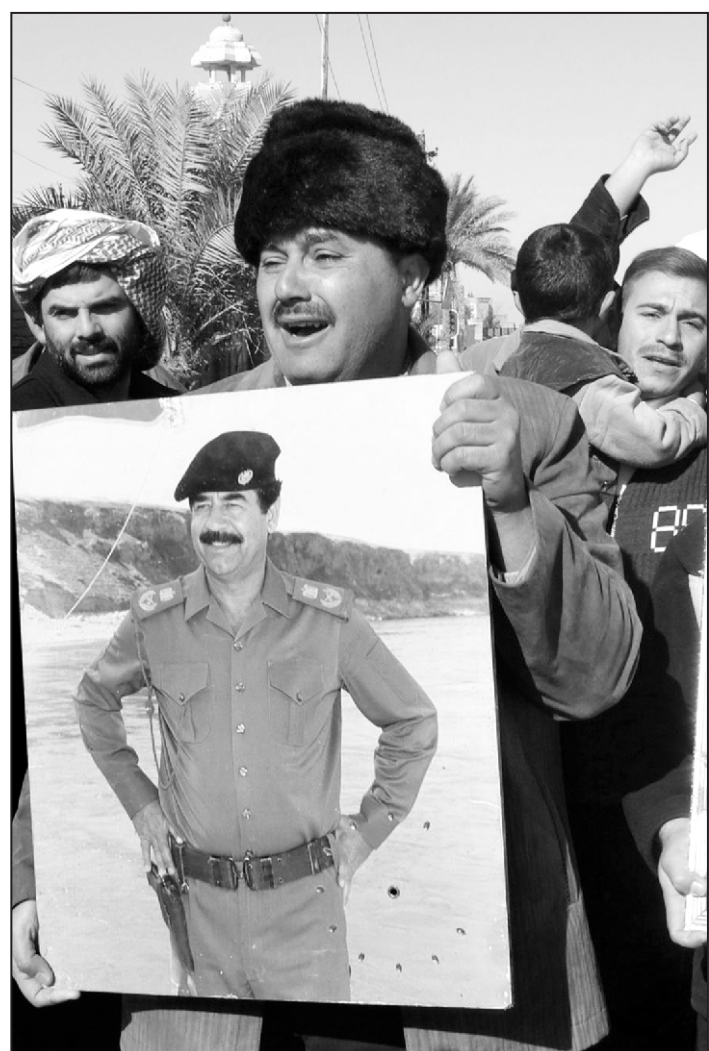


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis carry portraits of executed former dictator Saddam Hussein, during a demonstration against his hanging in Saddam's hometown of Tikrit yesterday following Saddam's hanging early this morning for crimes against humanity.

US welcomes, Europe opposes execution

AFP, Paris

The United States joined its arch-foe Iran on Saturday in hailing the justice of Saddam Hussein's execution, but European powers opposed the use of capital punishment even though they condemned the former dictator's crimes in Iraq.

US President George W. Bush said Saddam had received the kind of justice he denied his victims.

Some key US allies expressed discomfort at the execution. And Russia, which opposed the March 20, 2003 invasion to oust the dictator, and the Vatican expressed regret at the hanging which some Muslim leaders said would exacerbate the violence in Iraq.

Bush was asleep at his Texas ranch when the hanging of Saddam was carried out in Baghdad after he had been found guilty of crimes against humanity, the White House said.

He called the execution "an important milestone" on the road to building an Iraqi democracy though he warned in a statement it would not end the deadly violence there.

The US president said Saddam "was executed after receiving a fair trial -- the kind of justice he denied the victims of his brutal regime."

"Fair trials were unimaginable under Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule," said Bush, calling the trial "a testament to the Iraqi people's resolve to move forward after decades of oppression."

Bush acknowledged that the execution came "at the end of a difficult year for the Iraqi people and for our troops."

"Bringing Saddam Hussein to justice will not end the violence in Iraq, but it is an important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy that can govern, sustain, and defend itself," he said.

Iran, the influential neighbour of Iraq and arch-foe of the US administration, also welcomed the execution.

"With regards to Saddam's execution, the Iraqi people are the victorious ones, as they were victorious when Saddam fell," said Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hamid Reza Asefi, in remarks reported by the IRNA news agency.

Saddam Hussein was reviled in Iran for a 1980 attack that sparked an eight-year war that cost around one million lives on both sides.

Israel, a strong US ally and enemy of Saddam, also hailed the hanging. "Justice has been done," a high-ranking Israeli official told AFP.

"We are talking about a man who sparked fire and bloodshed in the Middle East time and again, and who is responsible for the deaths of thousands of people," said the official on condition of anonymity.

Britain, the main US ally in Iraq, said Saddam Hussein had been "held to account" but reiterated its opposition to the use of the death penalty, as did Australia, another key supporter of the US invasion.

"I welcome the fact that Saddam Hussein has been tried by an Iraqi court for at least some of the appalling crimes he committed against the Iraqi people," said British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett.

A dictator created then destroyed by America

ROBERT FISK, *The Independent*

Saddam to the gallows. It was an easy equation. Who could be more deserving of that last walk to the scaffold - that crack of the neck at the end of a rope - than the Beast of Baghdad, the Hitler of the Tigris, the man who murdered untold hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis while spraying chemical weapons over his enemies? Our masters will tell us in a few hours that it is a "great day" for Iraqis and will hope that the Muslim world will forget that his death sentence was signed - by the Iraqi "government", but on behalf of the Americans - on the very eve of the Eid-ul-Aaha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, the moment of greatest forgiveness in the Arab world.

But history will record that the Arabs and other Muslims and, indeed, many millions in the West, will ask another question this weekend, a question that will not be posed in other Western newspapers because it is not the narrative laid down for us by our presidents and prime ministers - what about the other guilty men?

No, Tony Blair is not Saddam. We don't gas our enemies. George W Bush is not Saddam. He didn't invade Iran or Kuwait. He only invaded Iraq. But hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians are dead - and thousands of Western troops are dead - because Messrs Bush and Blair and the Spanish Prime Minister and the Italian Prime Minister and the Australian Prime Minister went to war in 2003 on a potage of lies and mendacity and, given the weapons we used, with great brutality.

In the aftermath of the international crimes against humanity of 2001 we have tortured, we have murdered, we have brutalised and killed the innocent - we have even added our shame at Abu Ghraib to Saddam's shame at Abu Ghraib - and yet we are supposed to forget these terrible crimes as we applaud the swinging corpse of the dictator who created.

Who encouraged Saddam to invade Iran in 1980, which was the greatest war crime he has committed? It led to the deaths of a million and a half souls? And who sold him the components for the chemical weapons with which he drenched Iran and the Kurds? We did. No wonder the Americans, who controlled Saddam's weird trial, forbade any mention of this, his most obscene atrocity, in the charges against him. Could he not have been handed over to the Iraqis for sentencing for this massive war crime? Of course not. Because that would also expose our culpability.

And the mass killings we perpetrated in 2003 with our depleted uranium shells and our "bunker buster" bombs and our phosphorous, the murderous post-invasion sieges of Fallujah and Najaf, the hell-disaster of anarchy we unleashed on the Iraqi population in the aftermath of our "victory" - our "mission accomplished" - who will be found guilty of this? Such expiation as we might expect will come, no doubt, in the self-serving memoirs of Blair and Bush, written in comfortable and wealthy retirement.

Hours before Saddam's death sentence, his family - his first wife, Sajida, and Saddam's daughter and their other relatives - had given up hope.

"Whatever could be done has been done - we can only wait for time to take its course," one of them said last night. But Saddam knew, and had already announced his own "martyrdom": he was still the president of Iraq and he would die for Iraq. All condemned men face a decision: to die with a last, groveling plea for mercy or to die with whatever dignity they can wrap around themselves in their last hours on earth. His last trial appearance - that was smile that spread over the mass-murderer's face - showed us which path Saddam intended to walk to the noose.

I have catalogued his monstrous crimes over the years. I have talked to the Kurdish survivors of Halabja and the Shia who rose up against the dictator at our request in 1991 and who were betrayed by us - and whose comrades, in their tens of thousands, along with their wives, were hanged like thrushes by Saddam's executioners.

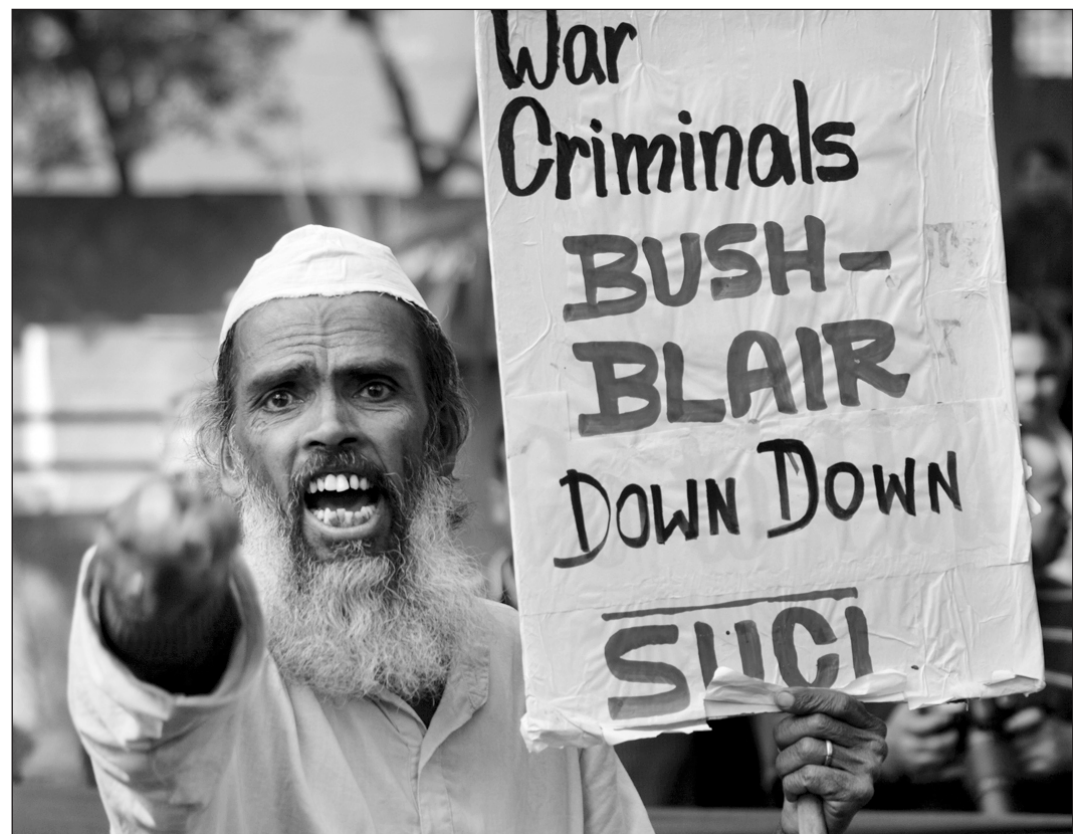


PHOTO: AFP

An activist from an India leftist organisation shout slogans during a demonstration near the American Centre in New Delhi yesterday against the execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussain. India, which had warm ties with the Iraqi regime of former dictator Saddam Hussein, condemned the execution of the ousted president.

The final hours of a tyrant

PATRICK COCKBURN, *The Independent*

Saddam Hussein's death warrant was signed last night. It happened as the nightly curfew brought Baghdad, the city where he exercised supreme power over Iraq for a quarter of a century, to a standstill. The leader who launched two disastrous wars that reshaped the politics of the Middle East and ruined his country waited to be hanged by the Iraqi authorities who had replaced him.

Saddam's principal lawyer, Khalil

al-Dulaimi, said US officials who have been holding him at Fort Cropper near the airport outside Baghdad had asked him to pick up Saddam's possessions and those of his half-brother, Barzan al-Tikriti, also facing execution. His two other half-brothers, Watban and Sabawi, visited him on Thursday and he gave them his will.

I first saw Saddam Hussein making a speech on a distant platform in Baghdad in 1978. He was already known as "The Strong Man of Iraq" and the following year he executed several leaders of the

ruling Baath party who were opposed to him becoming the all-powerful president.

Criticism of the leader and his family was highly dangerous. People in cafes in Baghdad were nervous if they accidentally spilled their coffee on their newspaper. They feared they might be accused of deliberately defacing the picture of Saddam Hussein that invariably appeared on the front page.

He wanted to be a world historical figure and in a way he achieved his ambition. He compared himself to the great heroes of the Iraqi past,

such as Sargon of Akkad, Nebuchadnezzar and Saladin. At the height of the Iran-Iraq War, when resources were strained in Iraq, he rebuilt part of ancient Babylon with ugly yellowed bricks, on each of which was printed his name.

Surprisingly he succeeded in making the world ring with his name. But he did so through defeat and not victory. In 1980 he invaded Iran and started an eight-year-long war in which one million Iraqis and Iraqis were killed and wounded. In 1990 he occupied Kuwait and was defeated by US-led forces.

The questions that will live on

ANDREW BUNCOMBE, *The Independent*

So why did George Bush decide to invade Iraq? Nearly four years and hundreds of thousands of casualties later, the reasons appear both as obvious and as elusive as they were in the spring of 2003.

The official reasoning was always straightforward. Key among the claims included in the so-called Iraq War Resolution passed by Congress in October 2002 was that Iraq "poses a continuing threat to the national security of the United States and international peace and security in the Persian Gulf region". It added that Saddam's regime harboured chemical and biological weapons and was seeking to develop a nuclear arsenal.

In an address to the nation just three days before the invasion, Bush declared: "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised."

It quickly became clear that central claim was not true, and it became equally clear the administration had been manipulating uncertain and "caveated" intelligence to make the case for a war that had been decided on long before. The famous Downing Street memo suggests that as early as July 2002 "intelligence

and facts were being fixed around the policy". Indeed, within hours of the attacks of 9/11, senior elements within the administration were seeking for a strike against Iraq even though there was no evidence it was involved.

But if the alleged threat of WMD was based on manipulated intelligence some provided by Iraqi exiles such as Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress - what else motivated the US? Many remain convinced the overwhelming factor was a desire to control Iraq's oil supplies, the second largest proven reserves in the world. Such a view has been reinforced by recent recommendations of Iraq Study Group which said: "The United States should assist Iraqi leaders to reorganise the national oil industry as a commercial enterprise, in order to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability."

Some point out that a desire among some in government to oust Saddam predated 9/11, and suggest in the aftermath of those attacks, a climate existed in which it was easier to pursue an invasion. Indeed, among the signatories to the 1998 letter from the neo-con Project for the New American Century calling on President Clinton to take on Saddam were former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul

Wolfowitz. Wolfowitz later said Saddam's alleged possession of WMD was just one of many reasons for invading. "For bureaucratic reasons, we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on," he said.

David Swanson, a founder of afterdowningstreet.org, a coalition of peace and activist groups, said: "The one thing we know is that the reasons they told us were false. [I think] they wanted an Iraq that looked free but isn't and they wanted to control it. They wanted the oil and the power that comes with controlling that oil and making profits for British and US oil companies."

Did other factors influence Bush? Was he seeking revenge against "the guy who tried to kill my dad" - a reference to an alleged plot to kill the president's father during a visit to Kuwait in 1993 or was there even a broader strategic rationale, one that would benefit Israel something claimed by peace activist Cindy Sheehan.

What does seem certain is that there was a confluence of factors and interests coming together in the aftermath of 9/11 that allowed Bush to proceed to war with little opposition from the Congress, or indeed, the media.

Madrid airport bombing ends ETA ceasefire

AFP, Madrid

A car bomb blamed on the armed Basque separatist groups ETA exploded Saturday at Madrid international airport, injuring 19 people and signalling the apparent end of a nine-month ceasefire.

Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba reported that one person was missing after the blast, for which ETA claimed responsibility in one of an early morning series of anonymous telephone calls.

In the event of the missing person being found dead, Spain would mourn its first ETA-related fatality since May 2003, when two policemen were killed in a car bomb attack in the Navarra region adjoining the northern Basque region.

ETA called a "permanent ceasefire" on March 22 since when the Socialist government has attempted to broker a dialogue with the group.

But continuing low-level vio-

lence and the October theft of a stash of handguns in southern France which was blamed on ETA has hampered attempts to foster peace.

Rubalcaba gave a blunt assessment as Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero prepared to end a family holiday and fly back to Madrid late Saturday afternoon.

The attack "breaks the ceasefire," Rubalcaba told reporters.

"I roundly condemn this blast which interrupts, which breaks nine months since ETA committed an act of violence.

"These are tragic moments which we are living," Rubalcaba said, confirming three calls warning of the blast.

Rubalcaba said Zapatero would later underline the "political consequences" of the attack and said ETA still had to understand that "violence is incompatible with dialogue in any democracy."