

Ban declines to condemn Saddam's execution

AFP, United Nations

The new UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declined on Tuesday to condemn or defend the execution of Saddam Hussein, saying it was for each country to decide its position on the death penalty.

"Saddam Hussein was responsible for committing heinous crimes and unspeakable atrocities against the Iraqi people," Ban told reporters at UN headquarters in New York.

"We should never forget the victims of his crimes. The issue of capital punishment is for each and every member state to decide," said Ban after arriving for his first day of work as head of the world body.

But he said he hoped governments "pay due regard to all aspects of international humanitarian laws."

Ban's comments seemed to contradict the United Nations' traditional opposition to capital punishment, which was cited Saturday by the UN envoy to Iraq, Ashraf Qazi.

After Saddam was hanged, Qazi said in a statement that the United Nations understood "the desire for justice felt by many Iraqis."

But he added: "Based on the principle of respect for the right to life, however, the United Nations remains opposed to capital punishment, even in the case of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide."

Former Saddam trial judge says execution violates law

AFP, Sulaimaniyah

The first chief judge who presided over Saddam Hussein's trial for crimes against humanity said on Monday that the late dictator's execution by the Iraqi government was illegal.

Rizkar Mohammed Amin, who later resigned as the trial's chief judge, said Iraqi law banned executions during the Eid al-Adha festival period that marks the end of the annual Hajj pilgrimage.

The four-day Feast of the Sacrifice began for Iraqi Sunnis on Saturday -- the day Saddam was hanged in Baghdad -- and on Sunday for Shiites.

Amin also claimed that Iraqi law stipulates an execution must be carried out 30 days after the appeal court's decision on the sentencing, which in this case upheld the death sentence of Saddam.

But in ratifying the death sentence on December 26, the appeals chamber insisted that the law stipulated the sentence be implemented within 30 days.

Amin resigned as chief judge of the Dujail trial following political pressure amid accusations that he was lenient with Saddam and occasionally allowed the late dictator to carry out outbursts in court.

Saddam was hanged on Saturday in a Shiite district of Baghdad after he was found guilty of executing 148 Shiite villagers from Dujail in the 1980s where he escaped an assassination bid.

He was buried on Sunday in his home village of Awja.

Iraq's National Security Adviser Mowaffaq al-Rubaie denied that Saddam was executed on Eid al-Adha, in an interview with CNN just hours after the hanging.

"Eid starts from daylight -- we had managed to execute him well before the sunrise," Rubaie said.

Powerful Iraqi Sunni tribal chief killed

AFP, Baghdad

A 75-year-old chief from Iraq's powerful Tamin tribe was thrown to his death from the top of a Baghdad building after gunmen kidnapped him from a funeral, a relative said yesterday.

Sheikh Hamed Mohammed Suhail, a Sunni leader in a mixed Sunni and Shiite tribe, was seized from the funeral in Agarguff area near Abu Ghaib on the western outskirts of Baghdad two days ago.

"He was dragged from the funeral and taken to Shuala area in Baghdad and then thrown from the top of a building," his nephew, tribal leader Sheikh Ali Suhail al-Tamimi, told AFP, blaming Shiite militants.

Shuala is a Shiite neighbourhood in western Baghdad.

Although Mohammed Suhail is a Sunni, nearly two thirds of his tribe is Shiite and he was known as a moderate who was working to reconcile Baghdad's warring communities, his nephew said.

"We accuse the Mahdi Army of killing him in this ugly way," Suhail said, pointing the finger at radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's militia, which has been accused of killing Sunni Arabs in Iraq's sectarian conflict.

Baghdad to hang two Saddam aides today

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq will execute two former henchmen of Saddam Hussein today, five days after the former dictator was himself hanged in Baghdad, an official at the Iraqi prime minister's office said yesterday.

Saddam's half-brother and former head of intelligence, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, and Awad Ahmed al-Bandar, the former chief judge of revolutionary court, will be hanged at dawn on Thursday, the official said.

"Their documents have been signed and they will be executed Thursday," he told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity, adding that the pair remains for the time being in the custody of US authorities.

On November 5, the two were found guilty along with Saddam by an Iraqi court of ordering the massacre of 148 Shiites from Dujail village in the 1980s in revenge for an failed attempt on the then president's life.

Saddam was hanged on December 30 at a former torture centre in Baghdad's Shiite district of Kadhimiyah and buried a day later at his home village of Awja in northern Iraq.

Barzan and Bandar were to have been hanged along with Saddam, but their execution was later postponed as "we did not have time on that day," the official in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office said.



PHOTO: AFP

Saddam's half-brother and former head of intelligence, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti (R), and Awad Ahmed al-Bandar, the former chief judge of revolutionary court, will be hanged at dawn today.

The Iraqi government wanted to complete Saddam's execution before sunrise, which marked the start of Eid al-Adha, one of Islam's holiest holidays and traditionally a time for forgiveness. The festival ends on Wednesday.

Hot-tempered and secretive, Barzan was one of Saddam's most trusted aides, while Bandar was the first judge to be tried for ordering executions since Nazi judges were brought before the Nuremberg trials after World War II.

Saddam's execution, meanwhile, has dramatically increased tension between Iraq's already feuding Sunni and Shiite communities, especially after a grisly video showing the Sunni leader taunted by Shiite hangmen surfaced.

On Tuesday, Maliki launched an inquiry into the source of the grainy

yet graphic video, apparently taken with a mobile phone, which has enraged Sunni Arabs across Iraq and offended international leaders.

"He's very serious about this inquiry, and he wants to punish whoever is responsible," said a Shiite lawmaker with close links to the prime minister.

The unofficial footage shows Saddam taunted by Shiite guards shouting the name of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr -- making the execution look more like a sectarian lynching than a court-directed punishment.

It appeared on the Internet, and was exchanged between Iraqi mobile phones.

Sami al-Askari, a senior official who attended the execution, said Maliki had ordered a three-member panel of inquiry to find which of those present at the

As inmate ,Saddam read poetry, fed the birds

AFP, Washington

Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was an avid reader, fed birds and told jokes while he was in US custody, an American military nurse who looked after him said in interviews with US media.

Robert Ellis, 56, an operating room nurse assigned to Saddam during his US military detention, described a courteous, contemplative figure in stark contrast to the brutal reputation Saddam earned during his rule over Iraq.

"He basically talked about his wife, and his children," Ellis told CNN on Monday.

"He was an avid reader. Loved to read and write. He had a lot of stories that he had written. He had a pamphlet that he wrote in every day and then when time came to visit him he'd read things to me," the army reservist said.

The master sergeant said he had strict orders to ensure Saddam stayed alive while in US hands.

"That was my job: to keep him alive and healthy, so they could kill him at a later date," Ellis recounted in an interview from his home in Normandy, Missouri with the St Louis Post-Dispatch published on Sunday.

Saddam was convicted of crimes against humanity and executed by hanging on Saturday, an end that did not sit well with Ellis.

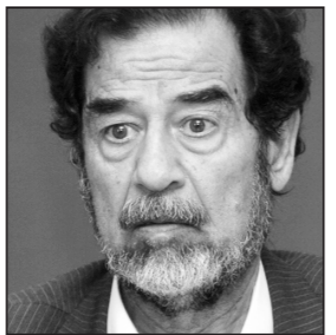
"I was kind of disappointed (by the execution)," Ellis told CNN.

"I thought that they would more or less put him in jail for the rest of his life to kind of stem some of the

violence that I knew was going to take place," he said.

When Saddam at one point was allowed short walks outside, the former president would feed birds pieces of bread saved from his meals, the nurse told the St Louis newspaper. Saddam also watered a plot of weeds.

"He said he was a farmer when



he was young and he never forgot where he came from," Ellis told the paper.

Ellis said he did not believe Saddam was lonely while in detention "because he was jovial at times."

Saddam "had a good sense of humor. You know, made jokes, you know. And he spent most of his time reading, and praying," he said.

Ellis said he monitored Saddam's health from January 2004 to August 2004, visiting him twice a day, giving him medicine daily, checking his blood pressure and temperature and ensuring he was receiving enough food and water.

Guards referred to Saddam by

the code name "Victor," he said.

Saddam went on a hunger strike at one point, refusing to eat when guards slid food through the slot on the bottom of his cell door.

But when guards starting opening the door, Saddam dropped his hunger strike.

"He refused to be fed like a lion," Ellis said.

At no time did Saddam display hostility toward him, Ellis said, but his patient did ask him why the United States had led an invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"He said everything he did was for Iraq," Ellis told the St Louis newspaper.

"One day when I went to see him, he asked why we invaded. Well, he made gestures like shooting a machine gun and asked why soldiers came and shot up the place. He said the laws in Iraq were fair and the weapons inspectors didn't find anything.

"I said, 'That's politics. We soldiers don't get caught up in that sort of thing.'"

Saddam never spoke of dying and unlike his defiant, angry appearances at his trial proceedings, he rarely complained, Ellis said.

"When he was with me, he was in a different environment," he said. "I posed no threat. In fact, I was there to help him, and he respected that."

Ellis had mixed feelings about his role, knowing he was treating a patient who would likely be put to death.

"I knew all along what they were going to do. This went against my grain as a nurse, but as a soldier--well, that was my job"

hanging had filmed the execution.

Interior Ministry spokesman Brigadier General Abdel Karim Khalaf said the committee was "working secretly and we can't give details (but) whoever is responsible for leaking the film will be punished."

On Tuesday, Munqith al-Faroon, the prosecutor who oversaw the execution, said on Al-Jazeera television there were only two people who had mobile phones inside the room. "They were senior government officials," he said.

Aside from Askari, who has denied filming, there were a handful of other officials present at the hanging, including National Security Adviser Mowaffaq al-Rubaie, who was not available for comment.

That someone in the party executing Saddam should be a Sadr supporter has angered Sunnis and has given a sectarian colour to the hanging of one of the most powerful Sunni Arab leaders.

The footage ends with Saddam -- convicted for crimes against humanity -- falling through the trapdoor of the gallows amid shouts from the crowd.

US military spokesman Major General William Caldwell said US forces handed "physical control" of Saddam to Iraqi officials shortly before the hanging, and all US personnel had left the Iraqi prison facility before it took place.

Three 'foreign fighters' to die in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

An Iraqi court has sentenced a Saudi, a Syrian and a Sudanese to death after finding them guilty of Al-Qaeda related terrorist offences, the US-led coalition in Iraq said yesterday.

The alleged foreign fighters were among 48 detainees convicted by the Central Criminal Court of Iraq between December 8 and 28 last year.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in March 2003, hundreds of Muslim volunteers have flooded into Iraq to fight against US forces and, increasingly, the Shiite-led government.

The Syrian and the Saudi "were captured on June 19 in a targeted raid on Al-Qaeda members," the statement said.

"The defendants were found guarding a house containing a hostage and both admitted they were responsible... On December 26 the trial panel considered all the evidence and sentenced the men to death," it said.

Iraqi army soldiers pulled the Sudanese off a bus on July 7.

"The defendant is a media leader for Al-Qaeda and produced videos and flyers for the organisation. The defendant confessed to being a member of Al-Qaeda multiple times to both Iraqi and multinational forces," the statement said.

He was sentenced to death on December 12. The statement did not say if or when the sentences were carried out.

Eight Iraqis were sentenced to life imprisonment during the same period, including one who was convicted of murder after taking part in a clash that left two soldiers from the US-led coalition.

The rest of the defendants -- including 28 Iraqis, two Saudis, a Syrian, two Yemenis, a Jordanian and a Sudanese -- were sentenced to between two and 30 years in prison for a mix of offences, including illegal border crossing.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives waiting to hear news of near and dear ones missing in the ferry accident break down after the rescue teams arrive at the port in Surabaya, in East Java, on Tuesday.

Hundreds still missing five days after ferry disaster off Java

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian navy ships yesterday battled storms and gale force winds to rescue 13 survivors of a ferry disaster, with hundreds still missing five days after the ship sank in a storm off Java island.

("Warship") KRI Hiu saved 13 survivors just south of Bawean island today (Wednesday)," Central Java navy commander Colonel Yan Simamora told AFP.

Bawean is 350 kilometres northeast of the Javanese port of Semarang, the original destination of the ill-fated ferry.

Navy ships, fishermen and search and rescue teams have found more than 200 survivors since the ferry sank late Friday with some 600 people on board.

"So far there are 205 survivors and seven people found dead," Semarang port official Bagasto told AFP.

Three unidentified victims were buried Wednesday.

The large wooden coffins were lowered into the ground in a simple ceremony in Rembang, east of Semarang, television pictures showed.

Survivors have been spotted on

liferrafts but bad weather and huge waves have been hampering efforts to pluck them to safety after days on the open sea.

Food and drinks have been dropped to them, attached to tyres.

"The weather is still relatively bad, with strong winds and rain," Simamora said, stressing that the search would continue despite the adverse conditions.

"We have seven navy ships, helicopters and Nomads (patrol aircraft) currently searching the area as far east as north of Madura island," just off Surabaya in East Java province, he said.

Meteorologists have warned that the bad weather and rough seas will continue for the next few days, with waves of two to four metres high and strong winds.

Preliminary investigations show bad weather was to blame for the accident, transport safety officials have said, as they continue to collect data.

The "Senopati Nusantara" (Archipelago Commander) was en route from Kumal on Borneo island to Semarang when it sank.

The vessel was carrying 542 passengers and 57 crew when it sank. It was licensed to carry 850.

Maoists blame Nepal govt for delaying constitution

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists yesterday said the government had endangered a power-sharing pact and elections by not sending an interim constitution agreed to almost a month ago for parliamentary approval.

Senior political leaders and the Maoists in December 2006 finalised an interim constitution that opened doors for the former rebels to join the government.

The document, signed by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and rebel leader Prachanda, was to be approved by parliament before taking effect.

However the constitution has not been placed before the legislature since it was signed and the rebels contend the government is stalling by saying that a UN-monitored arms agreement must be in place first.

"We are very much concerned by

the delay as the government is not serious enough to pass the interim constitution," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told AFP Wednesday.

"It has raised doubts if the planned constituent assembly elections could be held on time. This could give room to anti-democratic elements to plot against the elections," Mahara said.

But the government denied the Maoists' accusations.

"We are waiting for the arrival of the initial group of UN arms monitors by mid-January. Once they become operational the interim constitution will be passed immediately," said Ramesh Lekhak, a government negotiator and minister for labour.

"The government is committed to hold elections to a constituent assembly within the stipulated time," said Lekhak.

The two sides reached agreement on a power-sharing pact following

KIDNAP THREATS Foreigners advised to leave Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian security officials advised European and American nationals to leave Gaza yesterday because of a threat of kidnappings, a top official said, two days after the abduction of an AFP photographer who remains missing in the impoverished territory.

"We've had warnings of kidnapping operations and have asked American and European nationals to leave Gaza," a security source told AFP.

Another security source said that the request was in part directed at expatriate employees of UNRWA, the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees.

But UNRWA said it had no plans to pull its foreign nationals out.

AFP photographer Jaime Razuri was snatched by gunmen in front of the agency's offices in Gaza City on Monday, the latest foreigner to be abducted in the increasingly lawless coastal strip.

Two days later, no group had yet claimed responsibility for the abduction or issued any demands.

Indian police probe organ trade angle to child killer case

AFP, Noida

Indian police Tuesday probed whether a plot to harvest vital organs such as kidneys was behind some of the deaths of at least 17 children found buried next to a house near New Delhi last week.

Police officials in Noida, a satellite city of the Indian capital, said that they were checking connections between the two men arrested for the killings and a local doctor, after parents questioned why no torsos had been found among the remains.

"There was a suspicion that a neighbour who was a doctor might be involved in the human organ transplant racket," senior Noida police official Saumitra Yadav told AFP on the cordoned-off road leading to the suspects' house.

Mohinder Singh, a dealer in earth-moving equipment and who owns the property next to the sewage drain where the skeletons were found, and his domestic help Satish were arrested after the grisly find

was made Friday.

"There is no conclusive evidence. We found skulls but torsos are comparatively less," said Yadav, adding that their absence could be because of decomposition.

Police on Monday raided a nearby medical centre owned by the doctor neighbour, the Indian Express newspaper reported.

Diggers were still clearing debris dug up from around Singh's house Tuesday as over 100 police and dozens of reporters attended the scene.

The domestic help confessed to luring and killing 10 children with sweets and toys, Yadav said, while Satish's employer, who has denied his involvement, was also charged with rape, murder and concealment charges.

The murders came to light when police picked up Satish for questioning for his suspected involvement in the disappearance of a 16-year-old girl.

A maid who worked in the house

and who lives in the neighbourhood from where the majority of the children vanished has also been detained for questioning.

The victims, mainly girls, were the children of labourers living in shanty clusters near the house where the arrested men lived, and furious relatives have accused police of failing to act after the disappearances were reported.

"They came two or three times then they stopped coming. They said she eloped," said Sulata Halder, whose 13-year-old daughter Bina was among the first to disappear in 2005.

"They said, 'We will keep looking for her, but you also look'," recalled Halder.

Halder was taking Bina to work with her when the girl complained of feeling sick. She left her daughter near the tall water tank next to Singh's house to walk home and never saw her again.

On Friday, among the remains unearthed from the drain, she identi-

fied the loose green drawstring pants Bina was wearing the day she disappeared.

The shanty dwellers, most of them poor migrants from eastern West Bengal state, say dozens of their children -- most put the figure at 40 -- disappeared in the last two years, many of them from the near the same water tank.

"The police told me 'you Bengalis have so many children, then you can't take care of them.' They said 'she's a pretty girl, you have no idea what she must be up to'," said distraught Vandana Sarkar.

Sarkar's 20-year-old daughter, Pinky, disappeared in October and police officer Yadav confirmed she was among the official victims.

"I saw her white pants completely drenched with blood," said Sarkar, holding a photograph of Pinky at age 17, round-faced and pretty in a sari, with her hands decorated with henna.

"I cannot even begin to imagine what they must have done to her."

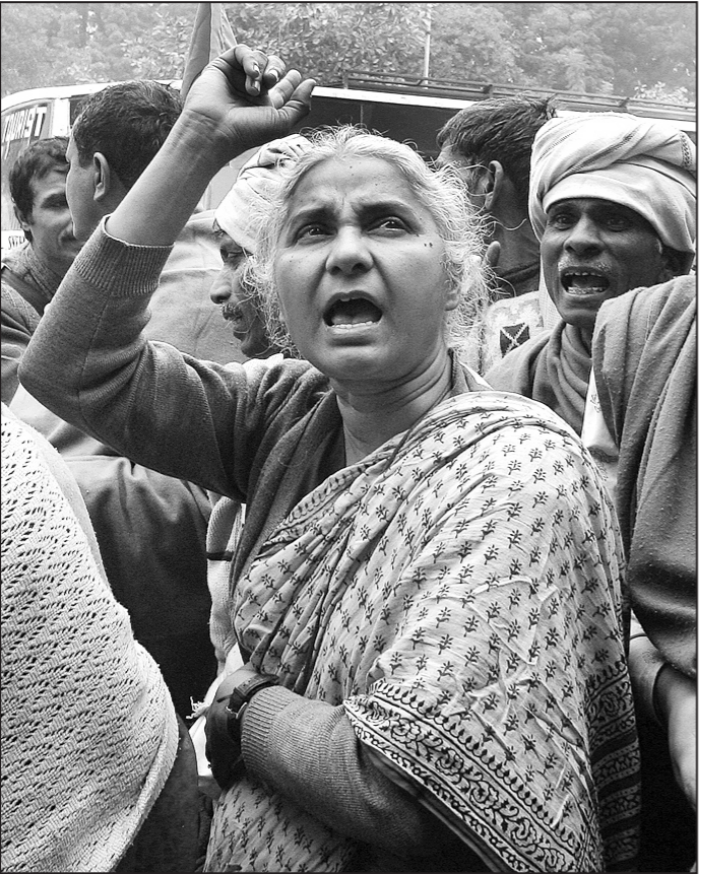


PHOTO: AFP

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) leader, Medha Patkar (C), along with members and activists, shouts anti-government slogans as they block the entrance to the Indian Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry office in New Delhi, on Tuesday protesting the Sardar Sarovar Dam.