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Iraq: Execution of Saddam Hussein aides is a further slide into errors of the past

Amnesty International today condemned the executions of Saddam Hussein's half-brother and the former head of Iraq's revolutionary court as a brutal violation of the right to life and a further lost opportunity for Iraqis to properly hold to account those responsible for the crimes committed under Saddam Hussein's rule.

Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, Saddam Hussein's half-brother and former head of the Iraqi Mukhabarat (Intelligence Service), and 'Awad Hamad al-Bandar al-Sa'dun, former head of the Revolutionary Court, were hanged earlier today. Along with former president Saddam Hussein, they had been sentenced to death on 5 November 2006 after an unfair trial before the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal (SICT). This verdict was confirmed by the Iraqi Appeals court on 26 December.

"Saddam Hussein and his aides should certainly have been held to account for the horrific human rights crimes committed by his government but this should have been through a fair trial process and without recourse to the death penalty. Reports that Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti had his head severed during the hanging only emphasize the brutality of this already cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Amnesty International is also concerned that another former government official is at risk of execution. Taha Yassin Ramadhan, the former vice-president, was sentenced to life imprisonment on 5 November 2006. However, on 26 December the Appeals Chamber of the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal referred his case back to the same tribunal requesting a higher sentence, suggesting that he is at risk of being sentenced to death and executed.

The trial before the SICT failed to satisfy international fair trial standards. Political interference undermined the independence and impartiality of the court, causing the first presiding judge to resign and blocking the appointment of another, and the court failed to take adequate measures to ensure the protection of witnesses and defence lawyers, three of whom were assassinated during the course of the trial. Saddam Hussain was also denied access to legal counsel for the first year after his arrest, and complaints by his lawyers throughout the trial relating to the proceedings do not appear to have been adequately answered by the tribunal. The appeal process was obviously conducted in haste and failed to rectify any of the flaws of the first trial.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases on the grounds that it is a violation of the right to life and the ultimate form of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. There has been a sharp rise in the use of the death penalty since its reintroduction in August 2004 in Iraq. In 2006 at least 65 people were executed, many of them after unfair trials

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