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Iraq: Amnesty International concerned about possible death sentence for former vice-president Taha Yassin Ramadan

On 12 February 2007 the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal (SICT) will convene to consider its Appeals Chamber's request of 26 December 2006 to increase the sentence of life imprisonment against former Vice-President Taha Yassin Ramadhan. If the request is granted he will be sentenced to death and executed within 30 days. Under the tribunal's law those receiving the death sentence cannot benefit from a presidential pardon.

Taha Yassin Ramadhan was sentenced to life imprisonment on 5 November 2006 after he was convicted, together with former President Saddam Hussain and six others, in connection with the killing of 148 people from the village of al-Dujail, north of Baghdad, after a failed attempt to assassinate Saddam Hussain in 1982. Three of the accused, including Saddam Hussain, his half-brother and former head of the intelligence service (*Mukhabarat*), Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, and 'Awad Hamad al-Bandar, former chief judge of the Revolutionary Court, were sentenced to death. Three other accused received prison sentences and one was acquitted and released.

These sentences were all upheld by the Tribunal's Appeals Chamber on 26 December 2006 and Saddam Hussain was executed four days later. Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti and 'Awad Hamad al-Bandar were executed on 15 January 2007. However, the Appeals Chamber decided to send Taha Yassin Ramadhan's case back to the trial court as it considered his life sentence too lenient, and instructed the court to consider increasing it.

The trial of Saddam Hussain and seven other defendants, including Taha Yassin Ramadhan, was unfair and the appeal process, which was concluded within a very short period of a few weeks, appears to have been no more than formality. The trial, which began in October 2005 and concluded in July 2006, was undermined by political interference, which caused one lead judge to resign, the appointment of another to be blocked, and by a failure on the part of the court to ensure the safety of defence lawyers, witnesses and others.

Three defence lawyers were murdered during the course of the trial. Rather than uphold the convictions and sentences, and call for Taha Yassin Ramadhan's sentence to be increased, if it had undertaken a fair process the Appeals Chamber should have ordered that the defendants be re-tried in accordance with international fair trial standards.

Background

Amnesty International investigated, documented and campaigned against the widespread human rights violations committed in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussain (1979-2003) – including mass killings, extra-judicial killings, executions after unfair trials, torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The organization called for the perpetrators of these violations to be brought to justice through fair trial proceedings and without recourse to the death penalty.

Amnesty International delegates were present at the opening of the al-Dujail trial on 19 October 2005 in Baghdad. The organization monitored the case throughout the trial's duration, appealed against the death sentences and condemned the executions of three of the trial defendants in December 2006 and January 2007.