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Former Saddam Hussain officials face death penalty

Amnesty International today called on the Iraqi authorities not to execute former Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and two other former officials sentenced to death by a Baghdad court.

Tariq Aziz, Sadoun Shakir, a former Interior Minister under Saddam Hussain, and Abed Hamoud, the executed former dictator's private secretary, were convicted by the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal (SICT) of participating in the killings of opposition activists. All three deny the accusations.

"Saddam Hussain's rule was synonymous with executions, torture and other gross human rights violations, and it is right that those who committed crimes are brought to justice," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"However, it is vital that the death penalty, which is the ultimate denial of human rights, should never be used, whatever the gravity of the crime."

"It is also high time the Iraqi government turned the page on this grim cycle and one step towards this would be to end all executions and commute the sentences of all those on death row, believed to number several hundred."

Tariq Aziz has been imprisoned since soon after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. He is elderly and reported to be in poor health.

He was sentenced to a 15 year prison term by the SICT in 2009 for his alleged involvement in the executions of 42 merchants by Saddam Hussain's government in 1992.

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about trials conducted before the SICT, which has a mandate to prosecute those accused of crimes committed under Saddam Hussain and whose independence as a court of law has been put into question by repeated political interference.

"Internationally recognised fair trial standards are essential and political pressures must not be allowed to influence the proceedings on any charges, but particularly those that may result in the death penalty," said Malcolm Smart.

If the death sentences against the three, including Tariq Aziz, are upheld by the tribunal's Appeals Chamber, they could be executed within 30 days.

The death penalty was suspended after the US-led invasion in 2003 but restored in August 2004. Since then, hundreds of people have been sentenced to death and many have been executed.