

# Saddam's Victims Await Justice; Hundreds Tortured, Killed After Dictator Was Nearly Shot In Their Town In 1982

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**DUJAIL**, Iraq -- Ahmed Daham al-Salameh was 12 years old on July 8, 1982, when **Saddam** Hussein visited this farming community. He remembers running with other boys after the president's motorcade until they heard the shooting -- an assassination attempt -- that sent the children scattering home.

That attempt on **Saddam's** life was the beginning of **Dujail's** misery.

Hundreds of families in this city 35 miles north of Baghdad were rounded up. Men were executed. Women, children and the elderly were tortured and imprisoned.

"We didn't do anything wrong, and (**Saddam**) killed five of our family. It won't be justice unless he is executed," Salameh said.

He hopes that punishment is handed out soon.

Iraqi officials say they will put **Saddam** and seven other former regime figures on trial Oct. 19 for the collective punishment of the people of **Dujail**, including the killings of at least 145 residents. It is scheduled to be the first of perhaps 10 cases that the Iraqi Special Tribunal could bring against the deposed dictator, who has been in American-run prisons in Iraq since his capture Dec. 13, 2003.

Salameh and his 5-year-old brother were blindfolded and arrested with the rest of their family just hours after the assassination attempt on **Saddam**. He recalls being beaten, tortured with electric shocks and sent to Abu Ghraib prison and then to a desert prison camp for three years with others from **Dujail**. Government bulldozers stayed behind to raze the prosperous area's vast orchards.

Salameh's father and four older brothers were taken away and executed, though the family would not confirm their fate until after the U.S.-led ouster of **Saddam** in 2003, when official records were uncovered that revealed the executions.

Today, **Dujail** is a city of scarred landscapes and horrific memories. Most of the razed houses and orchards have not been replaced. Living room walls bear the photos of the dead.

Some estimates place the total number of dead at more than 200. Helicopters strafed the town after **Saddam's** visit, killing some residents. Others died later in prison.

The death toll in **Dujail** is smaller than the tens of thousands killed in Kurdish villages in northern Iraq or by the brutal suppression of the Shiite uprising in southern Iraq, other cases under investigation by the tribunal.

But the relative simplicity of what happened in **Dujail** makes it a ripe case for the first trial.

**Saddam's** lawyers have said that they need more time to review evidence and that the Iraqi government is planning a sham trial. It is possible they will argue that **Saddam** did not directly order all that took place in **Dujail** or that the town posed a legitimate threat of an anti-government rebellion.

If the trial proceeds as scheduled, the world will watch as one of its most notorious dictators faces the victims of this city of about 80,000 people, where the large but dilapidated suburban homes hint at a wealthy past.

The shooting

**Saddam** had been president for only three years when he came to **Dujail**. In his ruthless rise to power, he had targeted members of the Shiite Dawa Party. The party, known for drawing support from the educated middle classes, had also opposed **Saddam's** attack on Iran in 1980.

Dawa was strong in **Dujail**, a predominantly Shiite city, and the regime frequently arrested and interrogated the farmers and traders there.

Accounts differ on the details of **Saddam's** visit, but most agree that his motorcade was fired on from an orchard by Dawa men who had probably mobilized quickly upon hearing of his visit.

This month, Britain's Channel 4 News aired a video obtained from one of **Saddam's** cameramen. The video showed residents coming to greet **Saddam**.

According to the Channel 4 account, **Saddam**, in a white Mercedes, visited a local Baath Party office and then might have been fired at on his way to view a health clinic.

After the attack, he spoke from a roof or balcony of the clinic and told a crowd that despite "these few shots," he could "distinguish between the people of **Dujail** and a small number of traitors in **Dujail**."

The video also shows **Saddam** questioning a young man about the shooting and ordering aides to hold him and another man, according to Channel 4.

Today, in a one-room office that used to belong to **Saddam's** Baath Party, three crowded walls display more than 200 framed portraits of **Dujail** residents killed after the assassination attempt.

The office belongs to the Baghdad-based Free Prisoners Association, which formed days after the regime fell and collected thousands of documents detailing executions and arrests around Iraq.

The association recovered a 1985 execution order for about 145 **Dujail** men tried in absentia by a Revolutionary Court, a special Baath tribunal separate from Iraq's main court system.

Today, the families keep worn photocopies of the list, which was their first official notice of their relatives' fate after two decades of painful uncertainty.

The last page of the document bears **Saddam's** signature, according to an official with the association and media reports.

#### The killings

The killings in **Dujail** began quickly that day in 1982. Residents said helicopters fired on the orchards on the edge of town soon after the assassination attempt. Then police, army and intelligence agents began hauling families to jails for interrogation.

Jassim Mohammed al-Hattou, 78, said he was called to a police station to identify the body of his son Abbas, who was apparently shot by helicopter gunfire. The family acknowledged that Abbas was a Dawa man and could have been one of those in the plot against **Saddam**.

They were all -- the parents, six sons and two daughters -- taken in for questioning, where the men were repeatedly subjected to electric shocks. They were held in Abu Ghraib for more than a year.

After that, most of the family was sent for more than three years to a desert prison camp near the Saudi border. Food and water rations were meager, and there was nothing to do but wait in fear of what could happen next.

Three of Hattou's sons had been held back in Abu Ghraib to face execution in 1985. The rest of the family eventually returned to **Dujail** to find its orchards of lemons, oranges, date palms and pomegranates flattened.

"It became a desert," Hattou said. "I couldn't even find it because I didn't recognize the land."

Hattou never replanted the orchard because he did not have enough adult sons left to work the land.

Investigators from the special tribunal have spent a week in **Dujail** collecting testimony. Hattou hopes the trial will be televised so he can see victims tell the world about what happened in his town.

"I don't know if I will be alive when (**Saddam**) is executed," he said. "But if there is a conscience in the world, such a man should be punished."

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Portraits of the dead line the walls of an office in **Dujail**, where the Free Prisoners Association estimates more than 600 families were imprisoned after the assassination attempt in 1982. Jassim Mohammed al-Hattou still mourns two of his sons, killed after **Saddam** Hussein's convoy came under fire during a visit to his city of **Dujail** in 1982. The city's orchards were also razed.

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