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Iraq court exhumes Shiite uprising mass graves



AFP Photo: Forensic experts collect bones and evidence on one of the mass graves of people allegedly...

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'We Never Want to Be Associated with That'

by Paul Schemm

Sun Jun 4, 6:12 AM ET

SOUTHWEST OF BAGHDAD, Iraq (AFP) - The Iraqi High Tribunal is exhuming bodies from mass graves as it prepares trials against members of the toppled [Saddam Hussein](#) regime over the suppression of a 1991 Shiite uprising.

In a remote desert location southwest of Baghdad, investigators were Saturday carefully removing 28 skeletons poking through the sand, their skulls blindfolded with Arab scarves, hands tied behind backs and bullet holes in their clothes.

The bodies, still clad in the clothes they were killed in, were placed in body bags for transporting to Baghdad for analysis in the forensic labs in support of the eventual case.

The Baghdad lab already has 300 human remains it is analyzing from mass graves in Al-Hadher in the north from the anti-Kurd Anfal campaigns of the late 1980s and from a mass grave in Muthanna province, also from the southern Shiite uprising.

"We have a very sophisticated lab back in Baghdad and that is where we will do the analysis under controlled conditions," said Michael Trimble, head of the mass graves unit of the Regime Crimes Liaison Office, a US-funded group to assist in the trial of Saddam and his former government.

The mass graves unit has been at this remote location for the last two weeks and consists of a team of 11 forensic archeologists, anthropologists and excavators that have set up camp here to analyze sites originally identified in 2003 as potentially containing mass graves.

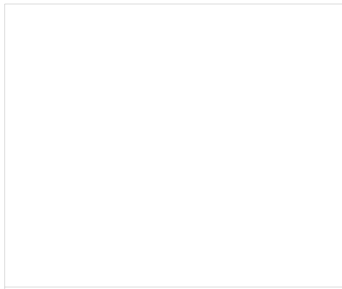
"There are 200 sites registered with the Ministry of Human Rights, witnesses led us to these sites," said chief investigating judge Raed al-Juhi of the Iraqi High Tribunal while visiting the site.

"These witnesses stated that some vehicles had taken people on the highway to somewhere and brought back no one."

"Our formal documents refer to over 100,000 victims (from 1991)," said Juhi. "The unofficial information we have that is not documented until now refers to more than 180,000 victims, but for us we talk about information that has been documented."

Saddam is currently on trial for crimes against humanity in the case of the massacre of 148

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Shiites from the town of Dujail in the mid-1980s and the court has indicated he will next be tried for the Anfal campaign.

Juhi declined to speculate when the case of the 1991 uprising, ruthlessly suppressed by Saddam's regime after his defeat in the first [Gulf War](#), would come to trial.

"So when we are finished on all these graves we've done for RCLO, we'll be able to tell you where the people stood to shoot, the trajectory of the shots, where (the victims) were hit, what shots probably killed them," said Trimble.

Unlike the larger mass graves from the Anfal campaign that contained often over 200 bodies, graves from the 1991 uprising, explained Trimble, are much smaller because the killings were more immediate and haphazard and not as well planned as the systematic efforts against the Kurds.

"What I was told to expect here from the attorneys is more men than women, which is exactly what we're finding, and smaller groups," said Trimble. "They were grabbing small groups, grabbing them, killing them and burying them very quickly."

A second site has been under excavation since Thursday and is expected to yield the remains of between three and 12 bodies, though it does not feature complete skeletons as at the first site.

There are another 18 potential sites in just this seven kilometer long area, however the rapidly approaching summer months has rendered further investigation difficult.

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