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By CHRISTOPHER TORCHIA and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) - Saddam Hussein struggled briefly after American military guards handed him over to Iraqi executioners before dawn Saturday. But as his final moments approached and masked executioners slipped a black cloth and noose around his neck, he grew calm.

In a final moment of defiance, he refused a hood to cover his eyes.

Hours after Saddam faced the same fate he was accused of inflicting on countless thousands during a quarter-century of ruthless power, Iraqi state television showed grainy video of what it said was his body, the head uncovered and the neck twisted at a sharp angle.

A man whose testimony helped lead to Saddam's conviction and execution before sunrise said he was shown the body because "everybody wanted to make sure that he was really executed."



(AP) Barzan Ibrahim, half brother of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and former intelligence chief,...  
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"Now, he is in the garbage of history," said Jawad Abdul-Aziz, who lost his father, three brothers and 22 cousins in the reprisal killings that followed a botched 1982 assassination attempt against Saddam in the Shiite town of Dujail.

The post-execution footage showed the man identified as Saddam lying on a stretcher, covered in a white shroud. His neck and part of the shroud have what appear to be bloodstains. His eyes are closed.

In Baghdad's Shiite enclave of Sadr City, hundreds of people danced in the streets while others fired guns in the air to celebrate. The government did not impose a round-the-clock curfew as it did last month when Saddam was convicted to thwart any surge in retaliatory violence.

It was a grim end for the 69-year-old leader who had vexed three U.S. presidents. Despite his ouster, Washington, its allies and the new Iraqi leaders remain mired in a fight to quell a stubborn insurgency by Saddam loyalists and a vicious sectarian conflict.

The execution took place during the year's deadliest month for U.S. troops, with the toll reaching 109. At least 2,998 members of the U.S. military have been killed since the Iraq war began in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.



(AP) This video image released by Iraqi state television shows Saddam Hussein's guards wearing ski masks...  
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President Bush said in a statement issued from his ranch in Texas that bringing Saddam to justice "is an important milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy that can govern, sustain and defend itself, and be an ally in the war on terror."

He said that the execution marks the "end of a difficult year for the Iraqi people and for our troops" and cautioned that Saddam's death will not halt the violence in Iraq.

Within hours of his death, bombings killed at least 68 people in Iraq, including one planted on a minibus that exploded in a fish market in a mostly Shiite town south of Baghdad.

Ali Hamza, a 30-year-old university professor, said he went outside to shoot his gun into the air after he learned of Saddam's death.

"Now all the victims' families will be happy because Saddam got his just sentence," said Hamza, who lives in Diwaniyah, a Shiite town 80 miles south of Baghdad.



(AP) Iraqi President Saddam Hussein holds-up a rifle on this file photo from Dec. 31, 2000, during an...  
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(AP) A U.S. Marine watches a statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled in Firdaus Square, in downtown...  
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But people in the Sunni-dominated city of Tikrit, once a power base of Saddam, lamented his death.

"The president, the leader Saddam Hussein is a martyr and God will put him along with other martyrs. Do not be sad nor complain because he has died the death of a holy warrior," said Sheik Yahya al-Attawi, a cleric at the Saddam Big Mosque.

Police blocked the entrances to Tikrit and said nobody was allowed to leave or enter the city for four days.

Despite the security precaution, gunmen took to the streets of Tikrit, carrying pictures of Saddam, shooting into the air, and calling for vengeance.

Security forces also set up roadblocks at the entrance to another Sunni stronghold, Samarra, and a curfew was imposed after about 500 people took to the streets protesting the execution of Saddam.

A couple hundred people also protested the execution just outside the Anbar capital of Ramadi, and more than 2,000 people demonstrated in Adwar, the village south of Tikrit where Saddam was captured by U.S. troops hiding in an underground bunker.

In a statement, Saddam's lawyers said that in the aftermath of his death, "the world will know that Saddam Hussein lived honestly, died honestly, and maintained his principles."

"He did not lie when he declared his trial null," they said.

Saddam's half-brother Barzan Ibrahim and Awad Hamed al-Bandar, the former chief justice of the Revolutionary Court, were not hanged along with their former leader as originally planned. Officials wanted to reserve the occasion for Saddam alone.



(AP) Iraqi President Saddam Hussein waves to supporters during his visit to the town of Kirkuk, north of...

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"We wanted him to be executed on a special day," National Security adviser Mouwafak al-Rubaie told state-run al-Iraqiya television.

Sami al-Askari, the political adviser of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, told the AP that Saddam initially resisted when he was taken by Iraqi guards but was composed in his final moments.

He said Saddam was clad in a black suit, hat and shoes, rather than prison garb. His hat was removed and his hands tied shortly before the noose was slipped around his neck.

Saddam repeated a prayer after a Sunni Muslim cleric who was present.

"Saddam later was taken to the gallows and refused to have his head covered with a hood," al-Askari said. "Before the rope was put around his neck, Saddam shouted: 'God is great. The nation will be victorious and Palestine is Arab.'"

Iraqi state television showed footage of guards in ski masks placing a noose around Saddam's neck. Saddam appeared calm as he stood on the metal framework of the gallows. The footage cuts off just before the execution.

Saddam was executed at a former military intelligence headquarters in Baghdad's Shiite neighborhood of Kazimiyah, al-Askari said. During his regime, Saddam had numerous dissidents executed in the facility, located in a neighborhood that is home to the Iraqi capital's most important Shiite shrine - the Imam Kazim shrine.

Al-Askari said the government had not decided what to do with Saddam's body.

The Iraqi prime minister's office released a statement that said Saddam's execution was a "strong lesson" to ruthless leaders who commit crimes against their own people.

"We strongly reject considering Saddam as a representative of any sect in Iraq because the tyrant only represented his evil soul," the statement said. "The door is still open for those whose hands are not tainted with the blood of innocent people to take part in the political process and work on rebuilding Iraq."

The execution came 56 days after a court convicted Saddam and sentenced him to death for his role in the killings of 148 Shiite Muslims from Dujail. Iraq's highest court rejected Saddam's appeal Monday and ordered him executed within 30 days.

A U.S. judge on Friday refused to stop Saddam's execution, rejecting a last-minute court challenge.

U.S. troops cheered as news of Saddam's execution appeared on television at the mess hall at Forward Operating Base Loyalty in eastern Baghdad. But **some soldiers expressed doubt that Saddam's death would be a significant turning point for Iraq.**

**"First it was weapons of mass destruction. Then when there were none, it was that we had to find Saddam. We did that, but then it was that we had to put him on trial," said Spc. Thomas Sheck, 25, who is on his second tour in Iraq. "So now, what will be the next story they tell us to keep us over here?"**

At his death, he was in the midst of a second trial, charged with genocide and other crimes for a 1987-88 military crackdown that killed an estimated 180,000 Kurds in northern Iraq. Experts said the trial of his co-defendants was likely to continue despite his execution.

Many people in Iraq's Shiite majority were eager to see the execution of a man whose Sunni Arab-dominated regime oppressed them and Kurds. Before the hanging, a mosque preacher in the Shiite holy city of Najaf on Friday called Saddam's execution "God's gift to Iraqis."

In a farewell message to Iraqis posted Wednesday on the Internet, Saddam said he was giving his life for his country as part of the struggle against the U.S. "Here, I offer my soul to God as a sacrifice, and if he wants, he will send it to heaven with the martyrs," he said.

One of Saddam's lawyers, Issam Ghazzawi, said the letter was written by Saddam on Nov. 5, the day he was convicted by an Iraqi tribunal in the Dujail killings.

Najeeb al-Nauimi, a member of Saddam's legal team, said U.S. authorities maintained physical custody of Saddam until the execution to prevent him being humiliated publicly or his corpse being mutilated, as has happened to previous Iraqi leaders deposed by force. He said they didn't want anything to happen to further inflame Sunni Arabs.

"This is the end of an era in Iraq," al-Nauimi said from Doha, Qatar. "The Baath regime ruled for 35 years. Saddam was vice president or president of Iraq during those years. For Iraqis, he will be very well remembered. Like a martyr, he died for the sake of his country."

Iraq's death penalty was suspended by the U.S. military after it toppled Saddam in 2003, but the new Iraqi government reinstated it two years later, saying executions would deter criminals.

Saddam's own regime used executions and extrajudicial killings as a tool of political repression, both to eliminate real or suspected political opponents and to maintain a reign of terror.

In the months after he seized power on July 16, 1979, he had hundreds of members of his own party and army officers slain. In 1996, he ordered the slaying of two sons-in-law who had defected to Jordan but returned to Baghdad after receiving guarantees of safety.

Saddam built Iraq into a one of the Arab world's most modern societies, but then plunged the country into an eight-year war with neighboring Iran that killed hundreds of thousands of people on both sides and wrecked Iraq's economy.

When the U.S. invaded in 2003, Iraqis had been transformed from among the region's most prosperous people to some of its most impoverished.

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Associated Press Writer Will Weissert contributed to this report.

