

Is his body still in Al-Awjah or was it exhumed?

Years after hanging, Saddam mystery lives on

AL-AWJAH, Iraq, April 16, (AFP): In his native village of Al-Awjah, the mausoleum of Iraq's executed dictator Saddam Hussein has been reduced to broken concrete and tangled barbed wire, showing no trace of his remains.

The man who ruled Iraq with an iron fist for a quarter of a century was hanged at dawn on Dec 30, 2006, delighting many of the country's long-oppressed majority Shiites and symbolising the humiliation of Saddam's fellow Sunnis.

US president George W. Bush then personally authorised the immedi-

ate transfer of the dictator's body on an American military helicopter from Baghdad to the northern city of Tikrit, near Al-Awjah.

But today, mystery and doubt hang over the final resting place of a man whose very name for decades filled Iraqis with dread.

Is his body still in Al-Awjah or was it exhumed, and, if so, where to?

Sheikh Manaf Ali al-Nida, a leader of the Albu Nasser tribe to which Saddam's clan belongs, has held on to a letter his family signed when they received the body, agreeing that Saddam

be buried without delay.

Saddam, 69, was laid to rest before dawn in the mausoleum he had commissioned years earlier.

The place turned into a richly-adorned pilgrimage site to which supporters and groups of local school children would flock on his birthday, April 28.

Today, visitors need special authorisation to enter, the site lies in ruins, and Sheikh Nida has been forced to leave the village and seek refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion, his

tribe has been "oppressed because we were close" to Saddam, he said, wearing the traditional robes and keffiyeh headscarf of Iraq's tribes.

"Is it normal that we should pay such a heavy price for generation after generation just because we're from the same family?"

At Saddam's grave, the mainly Shiite paramilitaries of the Hashed al-Shaabi coalition, tasked with security in the area, say the mausoleum was destroyed in an Iraqi air strike after the Islamic State jihadist group posted snipers on its roof.

Sheikh Nida was not there to witness the blast — but he is convinced that Saddam's tomb was "opened and blown up".

Jaafar al-Gharawi, the Hashed's security chief, insisted: "The body is still there." One of his fighters, however, speculated that Saddam's exiled daughter Hala had flown in on a private plane and whisked her father's body away to Jordan. "Impossible!" said a university professor and long-time student of the Saddam era, who declined to give his name.

"Hala has never come back to Iraq,"

he said. "(The body) could have been taken to a secret place ... nobody knows who moved it or where."

If that was the case, Saddam's family would have closely guarded the secret of the location, he added.

Saddam's tomb could have suffered the same fate as that of his father, at the entrance to the village, which was unceremoniously blown up.

But some, including Baghdad resident Abu Samer, believe the Iraqi strongman is still out there. "Saddam's not dead," he said. "It was one of his doubles who was hanged."

War neither

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They sought the help of mercenaries from every part of the world. The United States of America entered with its might in Syria, while the regime sought help from Iran and its hired militias. After that, it sought help from Russia to combat all Arab and non-Arab countries that entered this conflict directly or indirectly.

Today, Syria has become a country that is occupied by five countries namely Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US and France, and perhaps more countries. Foreign fighters of every color are awash on this land.

Is this the revolution that was meant to bring justice to the displaced people of Syria? Do Syrians still have a place among the thousands of fighters, or is it a proxy war the fuel of which is the helpless Syrians?

At the start of the conflict, the media hype intensified and even the Arab press supported the claims of those who were called revolutionaries. The Gulf countries stood by them under the pretext of rescuing the Syrians from oppression which exists in majority of the countries worldwide.

For the past seven years, Syria has been living a scenario which is not that different from the scenario that led to the murder of "Kulaib". This means, Syria is locked in a perpetual cycle of violence from which the only way out is through political solutions.

There is neither a victor nor a loser besides Syria — neither the opposition nor the regime. There should be a joint government involving the opposition's intellectuals and elites from the regime in order to set a roadmap that will bring an end to this misery.

Various locations in Syria sustained 50 minutes of bombardment by three countries but that operation did not lead to any positive results, while the regime claimed that it managed to withstand the strikes.

Without any doubt, it has become clear to everyone that a military solution will achieve nothing more than further frivolity and mess. There is no other solution for Syria except dialogue among the Syrians themselves.

When Japan was defeated in World War II, its emperor at that time was sacred. He was forced to come out to speak to his people through the radio, and go to the US naval destroyer to sign a declaration to surrender for the sake of his people.

Here, we are talking about the defeat of President Bashar Al-Assad. In fact, it is the defeat of the "militaries" that entered his country. Why can't these militaries lift their hands off Syria and leave it to decide its own destiny? Do these militaries think Syrians are still juveniles?

MPs submit

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manipulation of public money', which we are going to highlight.

He continued saying, "It is no good if the MPs do not rise against violations and thefts which has exceeded one billion."

He called on the minister not to resign before standing on the podium and said, "I think the message is clear."

In a related issue, Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouk Al-Ghanim confirmed receiving a grilling request from MPs Abdulwahab Al-Babtain and Omar Al-Tabtabaei against the Minister of Electricity and Oil Minister Water Bakheet Al-Rasheedi.

Al-Ghanim said that the grilling motion will be included on the agenda of the next session and in normal situation is to be discussed on May 1. Any postponement after that date needs a decision from the Parliament.

MP Salah Khorshid presented a query to the Minister of Electricity, Oil and Water Minister Bakheet Al-Rasheedi about the expatriates working as advisors in the government.

He wants to know the number their number and also the number of the employees in the government oil sector who work for private contractors?

He also wants to know whether those mentioned are still in the service of the government sector under the name of other companies.

Meanwhile, the Legislative Committee of the National Assembly unanimously rejected Monday the request from the Public Prosecution to lift the immunity of MP Mohammad Hayef in the case of municipal misdemeanors — for using place to do business other than it was allotted for.

Leaders condemn

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Its delegation was headed by its permanent representative to the Arab League, Saif bin Muqaddam al-Buainain, Qatar's state news agency said.

Most of the 22 other countries sent

Chemical arms probe in Syria stalls due to security concerns

Assad supporters rally in Damascus

THE HAGUE, April 16, (Agencies): Russia and Syria have stalled access to Douma by chemical weapons experts seeking to probe an alleged poison gas attack citing security concerns, diplomats said Monday, amid US fears that Moscow "may have tampered" with the site.

"The team has not yet deployed to Douma," the head of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Ahmet Uzumcu, said at an emergency session in The Hague.

The closed-door talks at the global chemical watchdog's headquarters came two days after a wave of punitive missile strikes by the US, Britain and France in Syria, in response to the alleged April 7 toxic arms attack on Douma.

The OPCW team had been expected to begin their fieldwork on Sunday, but they met with officials at their Damascus hotel instead.

Uzumcu said "Syrian and the Russian officials who participated in the preparatory meetings in Damascus" had informed the fact-finding mission "there were still pending security issues to be worked out before any deployment could take place".

Evidence of chemical weapons can degrade quickly in the environment, and he urged the nine-member, all-volunteer team be allowed to deploy to Douma "as quickly as possible".

But the American ambassador to the OPCW claimed the Russians may have already visited the site.

"We are concerned they may have tampered with it with the intent of thwarting the efforts of the OPCW fact-finding mission," said ambassador Ken Ward.

The Kremlin however dismissed the claims.

"I can guarantee that Russia has not tampered with the site," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told the BBC.

A spokesman for President Vladimir Putin said the allegations were "groundless", adding Moscow favoured "an impartial investigation".

The missiles that US, French and British warships fired on suspected chemical facilities Saturday constitut-

heads of state or government. Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani headed Qatar's delegation at last year's summit in Jordan.

Sheikh Tamim returned to Doha on Saturday from a US trip where he met Trump. Trump publicly sided with the Saudis and Emiratis early in the crisis but is now pushing for a resolution to restore Gulf Arab unity and maintain a united front against Iran.

Asked why Qatar was not on the summit's agenda, the Saudi foreign minister said: "Because Qatar is not on the agenda. It's not a big issue. It's not a big problem. It's a very, very small problem."

Barbara Bush

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Eight years after she and her husband left the White House, Mrs. Bush stood with her husband as their son George W. was sworn in as the 43rd president.

Hager said the former president "still says, 'I love you Barbie' every night," describing their grandparents' close relationship as "remarkable."

McGrath said Bush was concerned more for her family than herself.

"It will not surprise those who know her that Barbara Bush has been a rock in the face of her failing health, worrying not for herself — thanks to her abiding faith — but for others," he said.

President Donald Trump's press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said in a statement Sunday evening that "the President's and first lady's prayers are with all of the Bush family during this time."

Bush is known for her white hair and her triple-strand fake pearl necklace.

Her brown hair began to grey in the 1950s, while her 3-year-old daughter Pauline, known to her family as Robin, underwent treatment for leukemia and eventually died in October 1953. She

ed the biggest Western attack against the regime in the seven-year war to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The targeted sites were largely empty, and were all said to be facilities for chemical weapons storage or production.

In the Syrian capital, thousands of people gathered on the main Umayyad square to express their support for Assad in the wake of the missile strikes.

But at the OPCW, France urged nations to boost the organisation's work so it can dismantle Syria's "secret" toxic weapons programme.

"We all know, Syria has maintained a secret chemical programme since 2013," French ambassador Philippe Lalliot said.

"The facts are there, and they defy the most obscene lies and the most absurd denials," he said.

He added that priority must be given to helping the OPCW "complete the dismantling of the Syrian programme".

And the United States called for a clear condemnation by the OPCW of

"the Syrian government for its reign of chemical terror".

The trio of Western powers that carried out the strikes warned they would repeat the operation if Damascus used chemical weapons again, while Putin warned any fresh strikes would "provoke chaos".

Focus was however shifting to renewed diplomatic action, with a new resolution to be debated at the UN Security Council on Monday.

The attack on Douma, in which most experts say chlorine as well as an agent such as sarin were used, killed at least 40 people, according to local medics.

Holdout fighters from the Islamist group Jaish al-Islam subsequently surrendered their heavy weapons and left.

Regime forces have since entered Douma and declared the entire Eastern Ghouta region around it fully retaken, ending a five-year siege and reclaiming an opposition bastion on the edge of the capital.

Damascus and Moscow have ve-

hemently denied that any chemical weapons were used in Douma and alleged instead that grim videos showing civilians foaming at the mouth after the attack were staged.

Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said several coordination meetings were held with the OPCW team, but he did not provide any further details about their schedule.

"Syria reiterated its full readiness to coordinate and to facilitate the delegation's work," he said, quoted by the official state agency SANA.

But with all key players having anticipated its findings, the chemical arms watchdog faces a difficult task and there are fears the team may arrive too late on the ground.

"God, Syria and Bashar — nothing more," protesters chanted.

The square was closed off to traffic, and decorated with images of Assad in military uniform and sunglasses, as well as of his father and predecessor Hafez.

GCC seeks

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Giving an example, the official said, a computer engineer earns only about 49,000 pesos an equivalent of (Dh3,500) in the Philippines.

The high fees demanded by the recruitment agents drives up the fees of domestic help agencies in the GCC which they charge from their clients.

The ministers want to remedy the situation for the benefit of both sides of the employment process in a more transparent manner to make it less susceptible to 'extortion'.

Al Sabeeh said measures under the new system were to be considered for approval ahead of the Geneva meetings of the International Labor Organization in late May.

The Minister of Human Resources and Emiratization, Nasser Al Hamli, said the GCC pact will include working with various labor-exporting countries to ensure domestic workers get their rights.

The domestic workers who make up a sizeable component of the expatriate workforce and send millions of dollars annually in remittances to their home countries, constitute an important part of the temporary employment in the Gulf countries, which are keen to protect the labor rights, through applicable laws and practices, Al Hamli added.

He said the countries, which have witnessed numerous cases of murder, rape and other abuses of foreign domestic workers, would seek "to ensure the application of fair and transparent recruitment practices that could address any negative practices which the workers may suffer from in their homelands before arriving for work in the Gulf countries."

Such violations have prompted President Rodrigo Duterte of the

Philippines, an important source of foreign labor in the GCC, to stop sending his countrymen to region.

Kuwait has since worked with the Philippines government to guarantee more rights for the approximately 250,000 Filipinos working in Kuwait.

The UAE last year set up a special prosecution unit to try cases that involve the abuse of Filipino domestic workers after talks with the Philippines government.

On the sidelines of her visit to Kuwait the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Migrant Workers Affairs Undersecretary of the Philippines Sarah Lou Y. Arriola told the Al-Rai daily, the agreement to be signed between the Kuwaiti and the Philippines governments on domestic labor would significantly reduce the cost of labor recruitment, reports Al-Rai daily.

She said the sponsor in Kuwait ends up paying large sums of money to hire a Filipino house service worker (HSW) because of the recruitment agencies in both countries.

"This is why we have called for an agreement between the governments of the two countries directly, which will reduce the cost of bringing in the labor force significantly.

"The cost of hiring a Filipino HSW costs a lot of money for the sponsor because it includes the air fare, in addition KD 12 which goes to the Philippine Treasury and KD 450 for the agent in the Philippines while the rest of the money is taken by the employment offices in Kuwait."

Arriola was in Kuwait to look at the situation of undocumented overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) after the government of Kuwait set a deadline of April 22, 2018 for the undocumented expatriates to leave the country without paying fines.

She said senior government officials of her country will return to Kuwait to see what will happen to

the OFWs after the end of this, and also to visit the shelter "of our workers. This responsibility lies with my department at the Philippines Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

On the issue of the return of labor to Kuwait, she said that "President Rodrigo Duterte has added some items to the agreement that will be concluded between the governments of the two countries, in addition to the standard labor contracts.

"The Philippines President has requested that the agreement be signed in Kuwait and that the date of the visit depends on the outcome of the talks and the readiness of the agreement to sign, she added.

"We are currently looking at all these aspects to avoid any future problems. One of the reasons many of our workers have fled their employer's homes is for economic reasons. This is why we have to think that our agreements are directly between our two governments," she said. She expressed her thanks to the Kuwaiti government for granting this time limit to amend the conditions of the residence.

The large number of HSWs escaped from their employer because of cases of abuse and sexual harassment and a large number of fewer than a thousand of these victims are in the embassy shelter, which may be due to differences of cultures between our countries, which the embassy takes care of all their expenses.

"Our government is very interested in all its members abroad, so we are currently reviewing our own policy on employment abroad," she concluded, denying that what happens with their foreign workers is a kind of trafficking in people.

Newswatch

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came as war-torn Iraq gears up for legislative elections on May 12.

"A civilian was killed and 11 people were injured, including three bodyguards, in the convoy of Ammar Hadaya Kahya, a candidate for the Turkmen Front in Kirkuk," the security source said on condition of anonymity. (AFP)

LUXEMBOURG: EU foreign ministers on Monday discussed how they could persuade the US not to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, but stopped short of imposing new sanctions on Tehran.

Britain, France and Germany used a meeting of the EU's 28 foreign ministers to try to build support for expanding sanctions against Iran to punish it for its ballistic missile programme and its role in regional conflicts including Syria and Yemen. (AFP)

TEHRAN: Iran's ministry of education on Sunday banned the use of foreign social media networks in schools, the ILNA news agency reported, amid a push by Tehran to limit the influence of outside online platforms.

Schools must "only use domestic social networks" for their communication, the ministry said in a statement, according to the reformist-linked news agency. (AFP)

TEHRAN: Iran said Monday that EU sanctions over its human rights record were due to "differing values" but that they should not derail dialogue with Europe.

"We have certain differences of opinion with European countries and the European Union," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi said at a press conference. (AFP)

MANILA, Philippines: A Philippine domestic worker has been hospitalised in Saudi Arabia after her employer allegedly forced her to drink household bleach, Manila's foreign ministry said Monday.

Domestic worker Agnes Mancilla underwent emergency abdominal surgery after she was taken, unconscious, to a hospital in Saudi's southwestern Jizan city on April 2, the ministry said. (AFP)

MANILA: The Philippines government criticised on Monday Facebook's choice of two independent online news platforms to help fight the spread of fake news, saying they are biased against President Rodrigo Duterte.

Facebook said last week it would partner with VERA Files and Rappler IQ to launch a third-party, fact-checking programme aimed at preventing the spread of false news on the social media platform in the Philippines. (RTRS)