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Iraqi authorities should set aside the guilty verdict and death sentences of 24 men in the June 2014 massacre of up to 1,700 Shia cadets by the extremist group Islamic State, also known as ISIS. On July 8, 2015, Baghdad's Central Criminal Court sentenced the 24 at the end of a patently unfair trial that lasted only two hours and denied the defense the right to present witnesses and evidence.

The entire trial of 28 persons charged lasted just a few hours, with 24 convicted, and 4 exonerated. Iraq Media Net, the official broadcaster, announced its conclusion just over two hours after announcing its start. Iraqi authorities should order a fair retrial, Human Rights Watch said.

"The killing of hundreds of young cadets was a horrendous crime, and a fair trial for the accused is an important indicator of Iraq's commitment to fix its justice system," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director. "The families of the massacre victims, and in fact all Iraqis, deserve a full account of what happened at Camp Speicher and who was responsible for these tragic deaths."

On June 12, ISIS militants entering Tikrit from the north captured hundreds of cadets from Camp Speicher, north of the city. ISIS separated Sunnis from Shia, and then held them for hours in Tikrit's Presidential Palaces before executing them in groups in nearby areas, according to their own videos released and satellite images Human Rights Watch reviewed.

In total, 28 defendants faced charges under article 4 of Iraq's 2005 Counterterrorism Law, which lumps together those who carry out, participate, plan, finance, or enable terrorism. Prosecutors accused them all of participating in the June 2014 massacre, without specifying individual roles. The court considered each defendant's case for no more than five minutes, and delivered its verdict after only two minutes of deliberation, Habib al-Quraishi, an Iraqi lawyer who attended the trial as an independent observer, told Human Rights Watch. Al-Quraishi said that all defendants denied the charges and alleged that officials had extracted their confessions during pretrial detention under torture. The confessions were the main evidence presented against the defendants. The court ignored the defendants' allegations of torture and refused to allow them to present evidence that could shed doubt on the charge, al-Quraishi said. Some defendants claimed they had not been in Tikrit on the day of the massacre, but the court did not let them call witnesses to corroborate their claims. Had the court allowed him time to prepare and present a defense, one defendant could have presented witnesses willing to attest to his innocence. A neighbor of Ahmad Ibrahim Salih al-Duri, one of the 24, and a health worker from al-Dur, 40 kilometers south of Tikrit, told Human Rights Watch that al-Duri was not a religious zealot, had criticized extremists, and had

not joined ISIS, as other locals had. The neighbor said he had seen al-Duri in al-Dur at the time of the massacre so he could not have participated. Another al-Dur acquaintance told Human Rights Watch that al-Duri had hidden the vehicle issued to him by Iraq's Health Ministry to prevent it falling into ISIS's hands. Human Rights Watch is unable to confirm the details of the neighbor's and the acquaintance's claims. None of the 28 defendants had legal counsel of their own choosing at the trial. Instead, the court appointed defense lawyers but they did not meet with their clients beforehand or intervene on their behalf during the proceedings, al-Quraishi said. The rushed and summary nature of the proceedings leaves many questions unanswered, including what role, if any, each defendant played in the massacre, and whom they killed or participated in killing. It has also not been established why so many military cadets walked unarmed from a military base into the hands of ISIS, why ISIS massacred them, and who ordered and aided the massacre. But these questions were not addressed at the trial. Without a fair trial that provides a full and proper accounting, it is impossible for Iraqi officials to credibly claim that their justice system has established who was responsible for the crime, Human Rights Watch said. Abd al-Sattar al-Bir-Qadar, the Central Criminal Court's spokesperson, told the media that another 604 suspects were wanted for their role in the massacre. Iraq is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees a defendant the rights "[t]o have adequate time and facilities for the preparation of his defense and to communicate with counsel of his own choosing [and t]o defend himself in person or through legal assistance of his own choosing" (article 14). It also requires Iraq to ensure that every defendant in a criminal case has the right to "examine, or have examined, the witnesses against him and to obtain the attendance and examination of witnesses on his behalf under the same conditions as witnesses against him." During an armed conflict, the murder of anyone not taking an active part in hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those in detention, is a war crime. Murder, when systematic or widespread and committed as part of a deliberate policy of an organized group, can be a crime against humanity. Iraqi law currently does not include crimes against humanity as a distinct crime. Iraq should become a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to allow for possible prosecution of crimes such as war crimes and crimes against humanity by all parties to the conflict, Human Rights Watch said. The authorities could give the court jurisdiction over serious crimes committed in Iraq stretching back to the day the ICC treaty entered into force, on July 1, 2002. Iraq should also take the necessary measures to incorporate international crimes into its domestic law. "The verdicts in this case sentencing 24 men to death were reached in a couple of hours without allowing them to present their own evidence or challenge evidence against them," Stork said. "Such an unfair trial is no way to ensure that the true culprits behind the killing of 1,700 cadets have been brought to justice."

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