



EXECUTIONERS HAD KNIVES; DUCH HAD A PEN

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“The Crocodiles Already Knew How to Swim”

Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch) testified today about over 12,000 killings that took place under his authority at Tuol Sleng prison (S-21) and the killing fields at Choeung Ek during the Khmer Rouge period. Over nearly six hours, Duch took questions from the Trial Chamber in its most detailed examination to date. Perhaps due to the importance of the subject matter or the sheer length of questioning, even Cambodian judges Thou Mony and Ya Sokhan – who had not spoken a single word during the last month of proceedings – put questions to Duch.

On the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Choeung Ek is now an outdoor genocide museum of sorts with a memorial for victims of the Khmer Rouge and numerous mass graves labeled with signs explaining how many bodies were found in each and in what state. Early in his tenure as S-21 chairman, Duch selected Choeung Ek to serve as his main execution site because he was “afraid of epidemic” at S-21 where hundreds of victims had already been buried. Generally, when Duch determined that a prisoner had been thoroughly interrogated and a sufficient confession had been extracted, he would order that prisoner to be “smashed” at Choeung Ek. While Duch accepts responsibility for all these executions, at the same time he insists he was carrying out the order of the upper echelon of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) to kill these “enemies,” so his was a decision of timing and implementation rather than execution itself. Upon arrival at S-21, prisoners were considered “dead already.”

Some exceptions to this general process existed. There were some instances where Comrade Hor, Duch’s deputy, sent prisoners with “no significance” to Choeung Ek despite the fact that they had not been interrogated to avoid overcrowding at S-21. Disturbingly, Duch described this as management of “backlog” in their “workload.” Moreover, there were at least five cases of killings en masse, in which a decision was made to send groups of 100 or more implicated cadre to Choeung Ek. A smaller-scale mass killing occurred just before the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh when Duch’s superiors ordered all remaining prisoners to be killed. Over the years, Duch’s superiors “spared” perhaps 15 individuals because their skills, often artistic or dental, were useful to the CPK or S-21 in particular. Duch pointed out that Chum Mey, a former mechanic

and one of the few civil parties who attends trial every day, was among those spared. Without expression, Chum Mey nodded solemnly from his chair. When the Vietnamese took Phnom Penh, five such individuals survived not because Duch showed mercy, but because he fled for his life.

Even after Choeng Ek was fully operational, many prisoners still died at S-21 from sickness, starvation, blood-drainage, or excessive torture. In these cases, guards took photographs of the victims to prove they had not escaped. Young children were also customarily killed at S-21, rather than Choeng Ek. Duch confirms that children's heads were beaten against trees, but denies children were ever thrown off the roof because that would have violated the policy line about keeping killings secret. While there are documents to the contrary, Duch also denies that poisonous insects were used to kill prisoners at S-21.

With regard to the methods used to execute prisoners at Choeng Ek, Duch explained, "I never thought of the method that they practiced. Whatever they did, just make sure the prisoners were smashed." He said he never had to teach the special unit responsible for executions how to kill because "the crocodiles already knew how to swim." Executioners were selected based on their "good biographies," meaning they had a history of loyalty to the CPK. Duch claims he never participated and observed only one execution at Choeng Ek when his superiors ordered him to do so because a former high-ranking CPK member was the victim. When such high-ranking victims were killed, they were commonly stabbed in the neck, disemboweled, and then photographed, so the CPK upper echelon could be absolutely certain they had perished.

The special unit would tell S-21 prisoners they were moving to new accommodations before transporting them, blindfolded and handcuffed, by covered truck to Choeng Ek under cover of night. Once at Choeng Ek, prisoners were kept in a wooden hut until they were summoned one at a time to be killed. Prisoners were most commonly stabbed in the neck. The four Western prisoners that Duch recalls were stabbed in the neck and then "burned to ash" at the direction of his superiors.

At Choeng Ek, four staff members were in charge of digging and covering graves as well as protecting the site. When asked to respond to a document suggesting prisoners at times were forced to dig their own graves, Duch first disagreed, and then qualified that perhaps a maximum of five percent were forced to do so. At S-21, Duch claimed graves were usually prepared for three people, but said if there was evidence to the contrary he would not contest it.

As is often the case, Duch discussed his remorse and responsibility at length. He explained how he was more responsible for the murders than those who actually slit the victims' throats. The executioners were simply killing people who were already dead, he explained, but "I had a pen!" He acknowledged how the annotations he made on prisoner confessions were sent to his superiors and fed the cycle of arrests and executions. He was visibly upset or moved to tears on several occasions today.

The Chamber will not sit tomorrow because of a public holiday. The prosecution and civil parties have each been allotted three hours on Monday to question Duch on the killings at S-21 and Choeung Ek.

Press Conference

After the lively discussion last week regarding “Waterlilygate” and Helen Jarvis’ controversial appointment to head the Victims Unit, the ECCC Public Affairs’ press conference today was rather uneventful. Officials discussed the trial calendar through October 10 released earlier this week and provided seemingly unnecessary clarification about the Trial Chamber’s decision declaring Duch’s eight-year detention by a Cambodian Military Court unlawful.

Officials did, however, provide some interesting statistics on trial attendance. Since the Duch trial started on March 30, the public gallery has averaged 192 visitors per day, with greatest interest the first week of the trial. Officials happily reported that interest remains strong with an average of 163 visitors per day in June. Public Affairs announced it is drafting a new outreach plan for the remainder of 2009 and 2010 that will demonstrate an increased focus on outreach. Noting that foreign media coverage is strong and Public Affairs receives countless questions from all over the world, officials emphasized the key to reaching the critical population – Cambodians – is television and radio. Currently, two popular Cambodian television stations broadcast the daily proceedings.

Today’s press conference was the fourth such regular weekly meeting. The fact that Public Affairs is making itself available to the media even when there is essentially nothing to report demonstrates its commitment to bringing public attention to the important work of the ECCC.