



GUARD AT S-21 AND GRAVEDIGGER AT CHOEUING EK TESTIFIES

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Chhun Phal, age 47, looked simple, innocent, and relaxed as he testified with a smile in the trial of Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch). After initially giving a statement to the Co-Investigating Judges (CIJs) in early 2008, Chhun Phal, appeared before the ECCC on August 10, 2009, to testify about his experiences as a guard at S-21 and his brief time spent at Choeng Ek, the notorious execution camp colloquially known as “the Killing Fields.”

During the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) era, the witness spent most of his time working as a guard at S-21. However, in 1978 before the Vietnamese arrived in Phnom Penh, he was sent to Prey Sar and Choeng Ek where he grew vegetables and worked on the irrigation system. At Choeng Ek the witness was assigned to bury dead prisoners.

In 1975, Duch requested that youth below the age of sixteen from Kampong Chhnang be recruited to work as guards at S-21. Duch wanted young men from poor backgrounds who had no prior contact with political doctrines. However, Chhun Phal did not know that he was recruited as an S-21 guard due a request by Duch. The witness also never met Duch, even while assigned to work at S-21. Today, thirty years after being dismissed from his position as a guard, the witness had a chance to testify in front of his former boss.

Joining the Revolution

In Kampong Chhnang province, shortly before the Khmer Rouge (KR) took control in April 1975, a village chief assigned Chhun Phal, a fifteen-year-old boy, to join the revolution. The KR sent him to Sala Lekh Pram commune for about a week before they sent him to Phnom Penh. After spending a month in Phnom Penh, where he testified that he did little of anything, he was then sent to train in martial arts and military exercise at Takhmao.

Like other revolutionary soldiers, the KR enlisted Phal to farm at Prey Sar. Phal does not remember how long he worked at Prey Sar, but does recall that he worked next as a guard at Tuol Sleng. When asked by the judge if Tuol Sleng had another name at the time, Phal stated that the terms Tuol Sleng and S-21 were synonymous.

Situation at S-21

From his memory, Phal recalled that S-21 had four main buildings and Phal was assigned to guard one of the three-story buildings. At S-21, Phal and eleven other guards patrolled S-21 and kept prisoners under control. As a guard, S-21 staff taught Phal to be very cautious of prisoners attempting to flee or commit suicide. Phal testified, “When guarding outside the courtyard, I was armed, but if guarding inside, I was not armed. If a prisoner fled, the guards would be imprisoned.”

Phal further added that prisoners were held in individual or common rooms. Individual rooms had windows so that the guards could see the prisoners from the corridor and the guards regularly checked the shackles of the prisoners. In common rooms, prisoners were detained and shackled together. The guards constantly checked the lock to make sure the shackle was secure. Guards were on duty 24 hours a day and seven days a week; S-21 generated enough light at night so that the guards could see.

Prisoners

According to Phal, the prisoners were provided little food to eat and were skinny. Male prisoners were more carefully guarded than female prisoners. While male prisoners were shackled and kept in the common or individual cells, female prisoners were not handcuffed or shackled, but were put in securely locked rooms. Male prisoners needed to ask permission from a security guard before they could stand. Prisoners wore old and tattered clothes; some wore shorts, some trousers and some went shirtless. Phal testified that some prisoners came with their children, but those children disappeared two or three days after their mother arrived. Foreign prisoners were detained separately from Cambodian prisoners.

Burying the Bodies of Prisoners

When initially asked by President Nil Nonn whether Phal saw any prisoners taken away and where they were taken to, Phal said that he did not know: “Prisoners were brought in and taken out; some were brought back, some were not. I did not know where [the prisoners] were taken to.” However, just before the Vietnamese soldiers arrived, Phal was at Choeng Ek and he also admitted that one time S-21 staff sent him to Choeng Ek to bury dead prisoners.

The answer attracted the President’s attention and he began to ask more questions about how the guards treated dead prisoners. Phal testified that one day at around six in the evening, he was told to go to Choeng Ek to bury dead prisoners. Phal described the pit as being three meters in length by two meters in width. When he stood in the pit it came up to his neck. Phal added that all the dead bodies were naked and that after the pit was full, his group of three or four began to re-cover the pit with dirt and that “it took my group about two hours to bury one pit.” He testified that he buried bodies in only one pit.

The President then read the transcript of an interview that the CIJs conducted with Phal on January 18, 2008. The answers that Phal provided today were not very consistent with what he told the CIJs. When Phal did not explain, the President respected the witness’s right not to answer and decided not to continue with this line

of questioning. Duch then commented on Phal's testimony and said that he acknowledged that Chhun Phal was one of the guards at S-21.

After Chhun Phal's testimony ended, the Chamber called the next witness, Som Meth, 51 years old, from Kandal province. Meth joined the revolution in 1973 and was involved in several battles. He was given political and military training for eight months before becoming a guard at Dumpheng prison, a prison set up before the creation of S-21.

Meth had only one year of education and could hardly read or write. In 1977-1978, the KR sent those who could read and write to work as interrogators, while those who could not read were assigned to work as guards. Like other prisoners, shortly before the collapse of the KR, Meth also farmed the fields at Prey Sar.

Som Meth's testimony will continue on August 11, 2009.