



## **Cambodia Awaits Verdict in Khmer Rouge Trial**

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Hav Sophea's father was killed by the Khmer Rouge just after she was born and she's spent a lifetime trying to make him feel real. She even took the single photo she had of him — a black-and-white mugshot snapped at the regime's notorious prison — and used a computer to insert him into a family portrait.

But nothing helped as much as testifying before a U.N.-backed war crimes tribunal, which will issue a landmark verdict in its first trial Monday.

"That night, for the first time ever, I had a dream about him," said the 34-year-old, adding that the court, despite its flaws, has helped her deal with her grief. "He was holding my hand and we were running out of Toul Sleng prison."

More than 1.7 million Cambodians — roughly a quarter of the population — died from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions during the Khmer Rouge's regime from 1975-79.

But it wasn't until the monthslong trial of Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, that the traumatized nation started to speak out publicly about those atrocities. More than 28,000 people attended the hearings in the capital, Phnom Penh, and millions more watched on TV.

As part of outreach programs in the countryside, emotional villagers have gathered beneath coconut trees to tell stories about lost loved ones. Some angrily ask for answers: Why did Cambodians turn on one another and where was the international community then? Others complain about migraines and dizzy spells.

"One of the beauties of this process ... is that it is breaking the taboo, piercing the topic of trauma," said Theary Seng, a human rights lawyer and a victim. "People hear others talking about these issues on the radio, or in daily life, and they think "Oh I'm NOT crazy. I'm NOT the only one."

Duch headed Toul Sleng, a former elementary school that was transformed into a top secret prison for people deemed the worst enemies of the paranoid state: spies, traitors and saboteurs.

Many of the 16,000 people who passed through its gates were tortured to extract confessions. They were electrocuted, had toenails pulled out, and were nearly drowned. Today the prison is a museum, where pictures of men, women and children, snapped moments before they were killed, line the concrete walls.

Only a handful of people brought to Toul Sleng, also known by its codename S-21, survived. One of them was Norng Chan Phal, a child who escaped death when Vietnamese troops rolled into the capital and ousted the Khmer Rouge.

When he told the tribunal how, at the age of 8, he got a final glimpse of his mother holding onto the bars of her prison cell before she was led away to her death, he was crying so hard the court had to call a recess.

But afterward, he said, he felt his suffering "melt away."

Eric Stover, a human rights expert at the University of California, Berkeley, said many of the 90 people who testified at Duch's trial reported similar experiences. Some said it provided relief to face the former prison chief and to hear him admit his crimes.

But, he cautioned, that does not necessarily mean they benefited psychologically.

"I have found in my research at other tribunals that victim-witnesses can experience a boost — but not always — from testifying," he said. "But I always caution on proclaiming absolutes in this area. Other events in their life — loss of a loved one, a job, for instance — could later re-trigger past trauma."

Four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders are expected to go on trial sometime next year.

But because Duch is the only one to acknowledge responsibility (though he upset many on the final day of his hearing by asking judges for an acquittal), few doubt he will be found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Now the problem, experts and victims say, is the sentence.

Duch faces a maximum life in prison, but because the 67-year-old has mitigated with the court and already spent 11 years in detention, there is a chance he'll get less than that, perhaps even one day walking free, said Heather Ryan, who has been monitoring the trial for the Open Society Justice Initiative.

That could leave people more cynical than before the trial began.

Legal analysts have already criticized the process.

The government, perhaps fearing that a widening circle of defendants could reach into its own ranks, has sought to limit the number of those being tried. And its insistence that Cambodians be among the panel of judges and prosecutors has increased the likelihood of political interference.

Some outreach workers said, as the verdict approaches, they have noticed stress levels rising.

"More and more they remember traumatic events," said Judith Strasser, a clinical psychologist with the Phnom Penh-based Transcultural Psychosocial Organization. "They have extreme headaches, nightmares. They can't eat and they feel they are alone."

One of the people who is worried is Chum Mey. He also was sent to Toul Sleng, but his life was spared because he was an engineer and his captors needed him to service the generators.

"I am having trouble sleeping," he said, noting that Duch's last-minute acquittal plea is haunting him. "He can't get off lightly. Duch must be convicted and sentenced as an example to the younger generations."

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Associated Press writers Sopheng Cheang and Jerry Harmer contributed to this report from Phnom Penh.