



Cambodians doubt Khmer Rouge prison chief's contrition

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PHNOM PENH — When his trial started at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court, former Khmer Rouge prison chief Duch opened his defence with an apology for his role in the blood-soaked regime.

Duch, who will be handed his verdict early next week, told judges last year that he felt "regret and heartfelt sorrow" for the murders of around 15,000 people in the late 1970s at Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21.

"I would like to emphasise that I am responsible for the crimes committed at S-21, especially the torture and execution of people there," said Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav.

Duch, who became a born-again Christian before his arrest in 1999, went on to add that he would like to leave "an open window to seek forgiveness". Later in his trial he invited victims to visit him in jail for personal apologies.

Charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and premeditated murder, Duch said he acted out of fear that he and his family would be killed, and denied that he himself abused or killed prisoners.

Even though Duch accepted most allegations against him, he made a shock request to be acquitted on the final day of arguments in November on the grounds he was not a senior regime leader.

Few Cambodians believed his testimony.

"Duch never talked about real things. Duch did not say sorry to the people -- he just said sorry to the judges," said Chum Mey, 79, one of the handful of inmates who survived Tuol Sleng's

horrors because he was useful as a mechanic.

"He changed his testimony. Sometimes he said he was responsible, but then he would say he was acting under orders," Chum Mey added.

Before his surprise demand to be released, defence lawyers appeared to be making the case that Duch's remorse, co-operation with the court and apologies ought to land him a lighter sentence. It would be hard for Duch to deny responsibility -- prosecutors used his meticulous documentation of prisoners to demonstrate how he made Tuol Sleng one of the most efficient centres of torture under the Khmer Rouge regime.

French psychologist Francoise Sironi-Guilbaud, who examined Duch, said it was important to understand the former maths teacher is "always reasoning according to the rules of logic".

"He is willing to accept what is proven, and what cannot be proven, well, he does not accept it," she said in testimony last year.

According to Duch's psychological profile cited in the official indictment, he showed an "endeavour to distance himself from his past actions", but noted it was significant he expressed regret since 1999, when he was first arrested.

Despite his numerous pleas for forgiveness from victims and their families, many relatives of murdered inmates said they found that notion impossible.

Phung Guth Sunthary went every day to the nine-month trial, hoping to find out what happened to her father, who spent at least seven months in Tuol Sleng before he was killed, and wanting to know whether Duch was truly sorry.

But by the end of the trial, she said she was more convinced than ever that Duch's contrition was not genuine.

"These tears, they are crocodile tears... He tried and managed to make himself cry just to get the pity of the judges," Phung Guth Sunthary said.

Her father Phung Ton was one of the prison's most prominent victims -- the well-respected professor actually taught Duch. In court, Duch denied his former teacher had been tortured.

But the denial was one of the rare moments during the trial when Duch appeared to drop his guard.

"When he spoke about Professor Phung Ton, he looked uncomfortable for the first time... This is a sign he's not telling the truth," Cambodian psychologist Ka Sunbaunat, who also evaluated Duch, told AFP.

Most analysts say it's highly unlikely Duch will be fully acquitted on Monday. But it will be down to the judges to decide if his remorse is genuine or not -- and if saying sorry matters at all.