

The Washington Post

Khmer Rouge's chief jailer guilty of war crimes

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July 26, 2010

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- A war crimes tribunal sentenced the former Khmer Rouge chief jailer and executioner to 35 years in prison Monday for overseeing the deaths of thousands of people during a genocidal rule that devastated a generation of Cambodians.

Victims and their relatives who wanted a life sentence for the 67-year-old Kaing Guek Eav - also known as Duch - burst into tears after learning that he could face just 19 years behind bars after taking into account time already served and other factors. The sentence effectively means he could one day walk free.

It was the first verdict for the country's U.N.-backed tribunal, three decades after the Khmer Rouge killed and estimated 1.7 million Cambodians from starvation, medical neglect, slave-like working conditions and execution. The group's top leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 and four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders are awaiting trial.

Duch was convicted in Monday's verdict of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

During his 77-day proceedings, Duch admitted to heading Toul Sleng, a top secret detention center for the worst "enemies" of the state. More than 16,000 people passed through its gates before they were killed. Torture used to extract confessions included pulling out prisoners' toenails, administering electric shocks and waterboarding.

Unlike the other defendants, Duch (pronounced DOIK) was not among the ruling clique and is the only major figure of the regime to have expressed remorse, even offering at one point to face a public stoning and to allow victims to visit him in jail. But his surprise request on the final day of the trial to be acquitted and freed, left many wondering if his contrition was sincere.

Monday's decision angered many who were hoping for a more severe sentence.

"I can't accept this," said Saodi Ouch, 46. She was weeping so hard she could hardly talk. "My family died ... my older sister, my older brother. I'm the only one left."

Duch, who kept meticulous records, was often present during interrogations at Toul Sleng and signed off on all the executions. In one memo, a guard asked him what to do with six boys and three girls accused of being traitors. "Kill every last one," he wrote across the top.

After the Khmer Rouge were forced from power in 1979 after a bloody, four-year reign, Duch disappeared for almost two decades, living under various aliases in northwestern Cambodia, where he had converted to Christianity. His chance discovery by a British journalist led to his arrest in May 1999.

The court - 10 years and \$100 million dollars in the making - has itself been criticized for political interference.

The government insisted Cambodians be on the panel of judges and sought to limit the number of suspects being tried fearing, some say, that it would reach its own ranks. The prime minister and other current leaders were once low-level members of the Khmer Rouge.

Though most people doubted Duch would get the maximum life imprisonment, few expected he'd get less than 35 years in jail.

The decision to shave 16 years for time already served and illegal detention in a military prison, triggered public outrage.

"I'm shocked, as everyone is right now," said Theary Seng, a human rights lawyer who lost both of her parents and has been working with other victims to find justice. "It's just unacceptable to have a man who killed thousands of people serving just 19 years."

"Now no one is going to have the energy to look at the second case."