



## **K. Rouge prison chief sacks his international lawyer**

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PHNOM PENH — Former Khmer Rouge prison chief Duch has sacked his international lawyer just weeks before a verdict in his war crimes trial, the UN-backed court said Friday, after a rift emerged in his defence.

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, cited "loss of confidence" in his decision to dismiss Francois Roux as counsel at the Cambodian tribunal, where there has been discord between his international and local lawyers.

Duch's defence strategy imploded on the final day of his trial in November when he suddenly demanded his release after months of admitting responsibility for overseeing the murders of around 15,000 people at the Tuol Sleng prison.

During most of the trial, Duch's defence team focused on getting a lighter sentence by downplaying his position within the regime and by highlighting his remorse, his time already served and his cooperation with the court.

Prosecutors said at the time that the 67-year-old's sudden U-turn had raised doubts about his admissions of responsibility and his pleas for forgiveness.

Roux said in November the change in plea was a "bad surprise" and apparently linked to political interference in the trial, noting that Prime Minister Hun Sen had previously said he hoped the tribunal would fail.

His appeal for release "calls into question Duch's plea of culpability, but also the competence of the court," the French lawyer told AFP at the time.

At his verdict on July 26, Duch will continue to be represented by his Cambodian co-lawyer, Kar Savuth, who is also known to work for Hun Sen.

Kar Savuth in November argued that Duch wanted to be acquitted on the grounds that he was not a senior member of the Khmer Rouge hierarchy, while Roux had argued for leniency based on his contrition.

Both the Cambodian lawyer and Roux refused to comment on the sacking.

Theary Seng, founder of non-profit organisation the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation, called the timing of Roux's sacking "really suspicious", saying it could "create confusion and cynicism" about the tribunal.

"We are already very concerned that Cambodian officials at the court take orders from the government and now we have this on the eve of the verdict, so I'm perplexed -- as are many others following this process," she said.

The court, set up in 2006 as a final chance to find justice for victims of the blood-soaked regime, had already been mired in controversy over alleged political interference and allegations about kickbacks in return for jobs.

Duch is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and premeditated murder.

In hearings over nine months last year, the defence repeatedly said he only carried out orders out of fear he and his family would be killed.

Duch's jail was at the heart of the 1975 to 1979 Khmer Rouge regime's security apparatus. Men, women and children were taken from there for execution at a nearby orchard that served as a "Killing Field".

Under their leader Pol Pot, the hardline communist Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly two million people as they abolished money and property and set up huge labour camps in their bid to take Cambodia back to a rural "Year Zero".

Pol Pot died in 1998. The joint trial of four other more senior Khmer Rouge leaders is expected to start in 2011, while the court is considering whether to open cases against five other former Khmer Rouge cadres.

Sok Samoeun, president of Cambodia Defenders Project, a legal aid organisation that helps represent Khmer Rouge victims, said he was surprised Duch had sacked Roux as all the arguments in the case were completed.

"It looks like it's useless because the case is finished," he said.