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Dust settles on KRT verdict Veng Rachana & James O'Toole August 13, 2010

Simple summaries of the Khmer Rouge tribunal's first verdict are 36 pages long. The full-length judgment, bound with a blue cover and pictures of the court, stretches to 450 pages, its proportions practically those of a phone book.

In crafting their ruling, judges at the United Nations-backed court had to take account of both Cambodian and international law, relying on precedent ranging from French criminal courts to international war crimes tribunals for Sierra Leone and the former Yugoslavia.

The judges ultimately found Tuol Sleng prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, guilty of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the Geneva conventions, sentencing him to 30 years in prison.

With credit for time served, Duch stands to spend only 19 more years behind bars, a term that many victims say is unacceptably brief. Tasked with explaining a controversial decision of considerable length and complexity, employees of the Khmer Rouge tribunal took to the streets of Phnom Penh yesterday to distribute copies of the verdict and discuss its contents with victims and local residents.

At a community meeting yesterday morning in Dangkor district's Prey Sar commune, just a few hundred metres from the former site of the S-24 Khmer Rouge prison, a few dozen local residents joined commune chief Khat Sokhay and members of the court's public affairs section to receive copies of the judgment.

After brief opening remarks from court spokesman Reach Sambath, Prey Sar resident Duch Sey, 60, broke in with an expression of the frustration that many said they felt in the aftermath of the judgment.

"On the day of the verdict, Duch looked so cruel – he had killed so many people, but he was smiling," said Duch Sey, who noted the unfortunate irony of her surname as she railed against the

Khmer Rouge jailer.

“I’m not satisfied with a 30-year sentence,” she said.

Khat Sokhay said most residents in his commune shared Duch Sey’s opinion, judging the sentence “too little” for a man who admitted “only 30 percent of his guilt”.

UN court spokesman Lars Olsen told the gathering that an array of mitigating factors had played a role in Duch’s abbreviated sentence, including his cooperation, his limited expressions of remorse and the unlawful detention he served at a Cambodian military court following his arrest in 1999.

The tribunal has printed 5,000 copies of the full-length judgment along with 17,000 copies of the judgment summary to be distributed in schools and communities throughout the country. Reach Sambath said last week that the printing would allow “Cambodian people and students to learn and to understand about the reason that the court sentenced Duch to 35 years in prison”.

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, said the written judgment had important “symbolic” value and would be a useful resource in academic and legal settings. He said he doubted, however, that most victims or ordinary Cambodians would take the time to go through it in detail.

“Most of the people don’t care much, and also they don’t have to understand all those legal proceedings, so all they care about is the final judgment,” Youk Chhang said.

Immediately following last month’s verdict, some of the few survivors of Tuol Sleng, a facility in which nearly all of the roughly 16,000 inmates were eventually executed, were furious with the sentence. Bou Meng, 69, called it “a slap in the face”, and 79-year-old Chum Mey said it was “not justice”.

At Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum yesterday, however, it appeared their views had softened. Appearing alongside fellow survivor Vann Nath at a ceremony to receive bound copies of the verdict from court officials, the men expressed appreciation for the work of the court.

“Case 001 is finished, and I will continue to follow Case 002 until the end,” Chum Mey told Olsen.

Youk Chhang said the Duch verdict was “a difficult lesson, as expected, and I think that it’s going

to take time, energy and effort for people to really accept it". The three Tuol Sleng survivors, at least, said they had made some progress towards this end.

"This verdict is not 100 percent fair, but it is acceptable," Bou Meng said.