



KRouge prison chief key to Cambodia's genocide trials

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While more senior Khmer Rouge leaders will be brought before Cambodia's genocide tribunal former prison chief Duch is likely to be the star witness, key to unlocking the murderous regime's secrets, analysts say.

Duch, whose real name court documents say is Kaing Guek Eav, was charged last Tuesday with crimes against humanity. He is the first Khmer Rouge figure to be detained by the UN-backed court for crimes committed during the regime's 1975-79 rule.

His arrest is certain to be followed by more; four other top regime leaders are under investigation.

Their names have not been made public, but they are widely thought to include former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan, as well as regime leader Pol Pot's deputy Nuon Chea and foreign minister Ieng Sary.

But these former cadres have issued blustery denials, and Duch, who oversaw the regime's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, is the court's best chance of linking his bosses to the mass deaths that occurred under their rule.

"As Pol Pot's chief executioner, Duch holds the key to unlock the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge," said photographer Nic Dunlop, whose book "The Lost Executioner" detailed how in 1999 he tracked down Duch, by then a born-again Christian working anonymously with various relief groups.

"He was the link between the mechanics of the murder at that time and the leadership's directive. This makes him ... a key witness to the inner workings of Pol Pot's regime," Dunlop told AFP by email.

"Duch could, if he decides to speak as he did in 1999, explain the decision-making for the killings and the chain of command and responsibility," he added.

In interviews given shortly before his arrest eight years ago, Duch implicated himself, as well as Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan in the regime's atrocities.

Other equally damning transcripts of interviews with Duch exist and have been handed over to the court, said Youk Chhang, whose Documentation Center of Cambodia has been compiling evidence of the regime's crimes for more than a decade.

"He is the middle person, the joint" between the regime's top and bottom, Youk Chhang told local media.

Up to two million people died of starvation and overwork, or were executed, under the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 rule.

The communist regime also abolished religion, schools and currency, exiling millions to vast collective farms in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

Duch is "ready to reveal the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge", according to a provisional detention order issued by tribunal judges Tuesday before he was taken into the court's custody.

Despite the preponderance of documents left behind by the Khmer Rouge, its obsession with secrecy could prove an obstacle for prosecutors trying to tie individuals to crimes.

"Orders were often verbal and open to interpretation -- everything was hidden," said Hisham Mousar, a tribunal observer with the Cambodian rights group Adhoc.

Khmer Rouge officials referred to "weeds" being "pulled" and people being re-educated or re-located, cloaking their deaths in bureaucratic language and insulating the executioners from culpability.

This makes fulfilling the court's requirement that it prove the identities of "those most responsible" for Cambodia's genocide all the more difficult.

Both Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan have denied any role in the Khmer Rouge's crimes, saying they were unaware of the butchery occurring in distant zones under the command of more junior cadres.

"I had no power to arrest anyone. I was head of state -- but please find out if other Khmer Rouge leaders did something (wrong)," Khieu Samphan told AFP last week in a statement typical of the finger-pointing that could complicate the court's cases.

The dissembling is to be expected, some argue, making Duch that much more valuable to the uncovering the truth of one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century.

"If we assume that the leadership will not speak truthfully about how decisions were made at the top of the Khmer Rouge, Duch's testimony could be the most important offered," said Brad Adams, Asia director of New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"If he speaks as candidly at his trial as he did to journalists and human rights workers just before his arrest, then we may learn a fair bit," he added.