

The Phnom Penh Post

S-21 an 'anteroom to death', expert testifies at Duch trial

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August 7, 2009

An expert foreign witness at Cambodia's war crimes tribunal Thursday reiterated his characterisation of Tuol Sleng prison as "an anteroom to death", and called the accused Kaing Guek Eav "an enthusiastic and proud administrator of S-21 who worked out techniques and organisational methodology from scratch".

David Chandler, a 76-year-old history professor from Australia's Monash University who has written extensively on the history of the Khmer Rouge, including *Voices From S-21*, drew on his years of research to offer a nuanced portrait of S-21 and Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, the prison's commandant.

"I think that your book is a reason that many of us are here," civil party lawyer Alain Werner told the witness at the conclusion of his cross-examination.

In his research, Chandler has drawn heavily on the S-21 archives, which he said were "voluminous, hundreds of thousands of pages".

Asked why record keeping would be so comprehensive at a facility where all prisoners were presumed guilty and condemned, Chandler speculated that Duch "wanted S-21 to be seen by his superiors ... as a highly professional and efficient organisation of which he as its administrator could be justly proud".

Chandler also discussed at length the Khmer Rouge's extreme secrecy and obsession with conspiracy theories.

"Paranoia began at the centre and spread down through the ranks," he said.

Extracting confessions from prisoners to support the conspiracy theories of top cadres was fundamental to the work of S-21, Chandler said.

"[Low-level interrogators] didn't even know what the CIA was; CIA was just what you had to accuse the prisoners of belonging to."

Chandler at times drew parallels to China's Cultural Revolution and the Soviet Union's Bolshevik Revolution in assessing the Democratic Kampuchea regime, but he said that S-

21 was a unique phenomenon.

Public confessions and re-education programmes were crucial aspects of other Communist movements, Chandler said, whereas S-21 was "completely secret", and prisoners there were only "re-educating themselves in order to be killed".

During cross-examination by defense lawyer Francois Roux, the discussion took a turn to the philosophical, as he pressed the witness on "the crime of obedience", which Roux told Chandler was "the fundamental contribution of your book to these proceedings".

Duch has told the court that he was "an actor and a hostage of this criminal regime", and Chandler agreed that it was difficult to distinguish between Duch's personal agency and his obligations to his ruthless superiors.

"Who knows what you'd do if you were in that situation?" Chandler asked rhetorically. "But that doesn't mean that the people in that situation behaved in, in any sense, a commendable fashion."

In his response at the end of the day's proceedings, Duch told Chandler he was a "good researcher", and later asked to clarify for the record that a picture painted by previous witness Bou Meng of Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh's head on the body of a dog was only displayed at S-21 "because we could not find a picture of Richard Nixon".

Duch also requested that his written confession be made accessible to all Cambodians.