



Khmer Rouge Killer Jailed For Life

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A KHMER Rouge jailer who oversaw the deaths of 15,000 people has had his sentence increased to life.

Yesterday's decision rang down the curtain on a landmark first case at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court.

Survivors of the regime's reign of terror hailed the decision by appeals judges to raise the original jail term of 30 years handed in 2010 to Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Judges said the initial punishment given to the former prison chief did not "reflect the gravity of the crimes" committed in the late 1970s at the "factory of death" that was the S-21 detention centre.

"The crimes by Kaing Guek Eav were undoubtedly among the worst in recorded human history. They deserve the highest penalty available," said Kong Srim, president of the court's highest appeal body.

Wearing a white shirt and a beige jacket, the 69-year-old former maths teacher sat impassively in the dock as the verdict was read out, a brief pursing of the lips the only sign of emotion.

He had appealed for an acquittal on grounds that he was just following orders, but prosecutors also appealed saying the original sentence was too lenient.

The verdict pleased the hundreds of Cambodians, including orange-robed monks and elderly survivors of the brutal 1975-1979 regime, who packed the Phnom Penh court's public gallery to witness the conclusion of Duch's case.

"I can't forget the scars, the broken teeth, the torture," said Bou Meng, 71, one of just a handful of people to walk out of S-21 alive. "But this is perfect justice for me. I am 100 per cent satisfied with the sentence."

Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An said the sentencing marked "a historic day" for the country.

"Today the people of Cambodia and all the world remember those who died, and hope that this trial and the delivery of the final judgement bring some relief for your pain and suffering," he told the S-21 survivors and relatives of victims at the court.

Led by Pol Pot, who passed away in 1998, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for one of the worst horrors of the 20th century, wiping out up to two million people through starvation, overwork and execution.

S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng, was the centre of the Khmer Rouge security apparatus and thousands of inmates were taken from there for execution in a nearby orchard that served as a "Killing Field".

Duch, who for years after concealed his identity before he was discovered working in the jungle as a Christian aid worker in 1999, was the first former cadre to face the international tribunal.

His trial attracted huge interest in a nation still haunted by the brutality of the regime. The milestone final judgement was broadcast live on television.

"This is hopefully the beginning to an end for the Cambodian people in dealing with this dark past," said court spokesman Lars Olsen.

The original verdict had outraged victims because it meant Duch could have walked free in under 18 years given time already served.

Before being taken back to his detention facility, Duch briefly pressed his hands together in a traditional greeting to the judges.

During his nine-month trial the former prison commandant repeatedly apologised for his role at S-21, but later surprised the court by asking to be acquitted.

Prosecutors argued on appeal that the shock request showed Duch lacked remorse and demanded a life term, to be reduced to 45 years to take account of the years he spent in unlawful detention before the court was established.

"We got more than we asked for," international co-prosecutor Andrew Cayley told reporters yesterday, expressing "great satisfaction" with the outcome.

But as victims rejoiced, the verdict came under criticism from observers who accused the supreme court chamber judges of violating Duch's human rights by not giving him credit for the period of unlawful detention.

"It's shocking," said trial monitor Clair Duffy from the US-based Open Society Justice Initiative, adding that the ruling gave "unjustifiable weight to public opinion" in a country where arbitrary pre-trial detention is a big problem.

The end of Duch's case comes at a time when the court, dogged by allegations of political interference and criticised for working too slowly, is struggling to attract funds from donor countries. Hundreds of Cambodian employees are currently not receiving their salaries.

A second trial involving the regime's three most senior surviving leaders opened late last year, but there are fears that not all of the defendants, who are in their eighties, will live to see a verdict.