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Khmer Rouge prison chief charged

By: Ker Munthit

Cambodia's international genocide tribunal charged the head of a Khmer Rouge torture center with crimes against humanity on Tuesday, a historic first indictment against a top figure in the communist regime that created Cambodia's infamous killing fields.

The 62-year-old, also known as Duch, was one of five top Khmer Rouge figures whose indictments were recommended by prosecutors of the tribunal, which is a mixed body of Cambodian and international jurists. The judges have not yet released the names of the other four.

According to a transcript of a 1999 government interview obtained by The Associated Press, Duch claimed he was not a "cruel" man, but "an individual with gentle heart caring for justice ... since childhood."

"I was under other people's command, and I would have died if I disobeyed it. I did it (duty) without any pleasure, and any fault should be blamed on the (Khmer Rouge leadership), not me," he told a government interrogator after his arrest.

Chum Mey, a 77-year-old prison survivor, said he was delighted to hear that Duch had been brought to the tribunal.

Like many senior Khmer Rouge, Duch had an academic background. A student who excelled in math, he was a schoolteacher and then deputy principal of a provincial college.

Even before the Khmer Rouge came to power, he ran a prison for the group in the jungle, where suspected enemies were held and executed.

His chance discovery by a Western photojournalist led to his arrest in May 1999.