



## **Khmer Rouge prison survivor testifies**

### **June 29, 2009**

One of the few survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime's main torture centre wept as he told Cambodia's war crimes court how he was only spared because he painted propaganda pictures of Pol Pot.

Van Nath on Monday described how hunger drove prisoners to eat insects that fell from the ceiling at the communist movement's Tuol Sleng prison, and said he was so famished he dreamed about eating human flesh.

The 63-year-old is the first survivor to testify at the UN-backed trial of jail chief Duch, who is charged with overseeing the torture and extermination of around 15,000 people who passed through the notorious facility.

"The conditions were so inhumane and the food was so little," Van Nath said, recounting his arrival there. "I thought even eating human flesh would be a good thing for me at that moment."

Duch, real name Kaing Guek Eav, slumped in his chair while the former inmate recalled how he was photographed, stripped and then shackled with other prisoners after being taken to Tuol Sleng.

Prisoners had three teaspoons of gruel for each meal and some ate insects, Van Nath said, although he was unable to because they fell to the floor too far from where he was chained.

"I lost my dignity ... Even with animals they would give enough food," Van Nath said. "If they (guards) found out we were eating insects we would be beaten, so we could only do it if we avoided being seen by the guards."

Some inmates shackled next to him died during his first month and at one point he was summoned downstairs - so weak he needed assistance to stand and walk - and thought his own death was imminent.

But a prison official then told him he was needed in the workshop to paint a large portrait of a figure he did not recognise - Pol Pot, the leader of the 1975-1979 regime.

"I knew that if I did not paint very well, I would be in big trouble. I was so nervous," Van Nath said, calling it a "life and death situation."

Duch frequently visited the workshop, he added.

"I only had the feeling that I had to paint very good portraits so that he (Duch) would be happy," Van Nath said. "When he did not show good feelings in his facial expressions, I was scared and anxious."

Guards took one prisoner and strung him up in the yard at Tuol Sleng when it was revealed he was a poor sculptor, he added.

Van Nath went on to become one of Cambodia's most famous artists and the court was shown his paintings of torture methods including prisoners being whipped, plunged in water and having their fingernails pulled out with pliers.

"Even though I've tried my best to forget, it still haunts me," Van Nath said. "I never imagined that I would be able to sit in this courtroom today to describe my plight, my experience."

Sketches showed how he was taken from his family and tortured with electricity, while a painting showed Tuol Sleng guards whipping prisoners and seizing their babies.

Earlier in his trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, Duch begged forgiveness from the victims of the regime after accepting responsibility for running the jail. He faces a life sentence.

But the 66-year-old former maths teacher rejects claims by prosecutors that he had a central role in the Khmer Rouge's rule and says he never personally executed anyone.

Duch has also maintained that he only beat one inmate at Tuol Sleng, however Van Nath testified that he saw him kick in the head a fellow artist who survived and is scheduled to testify later this week.

Van Nath said he has worked to document the pointless suffering of Tuol Sleng's inmates, most of whom had done nothing against the Khmer Rouge.

"What I want is something that is intangible - justice for the people who have already died. That is my hope for what can be achieved by this chamber," Van Nath said.

Pol Pot died in 1998 and many believe the tribunal is the last chance to find justice for victims of the regime, which killed up to two million people.

Four other former Khmer Rouge leaders are currently in detention and are expected to face trial next year.