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Lawyers ramp up defence for former S-21 chairman

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Tuol Sleng prison chief admits to praying for forgiveness, as lawyers exhibit video footage they said shows his remorse.

Defence lawyers at Cambodia's war crimes court played footage Tuesday of their client, former S-21 chief Kaing Guek Eav, breaking down in tears during a 2008 speech to Khmer Rouge victims, prompting the former prison chief to declare that he prays for forgiveness from the prison's victims "all the time".

After prosecutors argued Monday that the born-again Christian, known as Duch, was downplaying his seniority in the regime, defence lawyers Tuesday hoped to portray their client as full of remorse.

"My father gave me life to do good deeds for the nation and the people, but I did the opposite," Duch said from the dock.

"I [pray] all the time, I ask forgiveness from my parents, from my teachers and finally I ask forgiveness from the victims," he said.

The defence's footage was three minutes of a recording of Duch at the Choeung Ek killing fields and S-21 that was conducted in the investigative stage of his trial.

Earlier, lawyers had urged their client to tell "the world and the public" who was really responsible for the crimes he was on trial for.

Duch responded that the orders had come from Nuon Chea and Pol Pot, but that they were passed through the party line via "a criminal mechanism".

Double identity

Duch, who admitted on Tuesday that S-21 was "not a prison, [but] a place to store people before killing", has juggled the dual personae of a victim of the regime's policy and a knowing, but regretful, party to torture and killing at its behest.

"I was a coward and beyond because I betrayed my friends and my teachers in order to survive," the 66-year-old told Swiss civil party lawyer Alain Werner.

Werner asked Duch whether he knowingly starved prisoners.

"It's a crime against humanity that everyone fell into, including myself, that I had enough rice in my hands, but I dared not take it to the prisoners who were detained in Phnom Penh," Duch said.

The court was closed for a trial management meeting in the afternoon that had been originally scheduled for Thursday.

However, defence lawyer Francois Roux announced he had a personal problem and would have to return to France that evening.