



Preview: Khmer Rouge Victims Prepare for Appeal Verdict

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Elderly survivors of a notorious Khmer Rouge security centre called Thursday for its former chief to be given a stiffer sentence when Cambodia's war crimes court rules on his appeal this week.

Chum Mey, a survivor of the s-21 prison, said the tears shed by Comrade Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, when he was sentenced to 35 years in July 2010 were 'crocodile tears.'

'A few teardrops from Duch can't take away the crimes he committed,' Chum Mey said through a translator, while sitting in the forecourt of the former prison complex that is now a genocide museum.

Chum Mey, 81, is one of a handful of living Cambodians to have survived the Phnom Penh torture centre. Duch was sentenced by the United Nations-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal for his involvement in the deaths of at least 12,272 of its inmates between 1976-79.

On Thursday, Chum Mey and several other victims of the Khmer Rouge gathered along with civil party lawyers under a colourful canopy set in the central grounds of the former prison, which had previously been a high school.

Under the puzzled gaze of passing tourists, the survivors, many turned out in their best clothes, exchanged their feelings about the appeal verdict scheduled for Friday, sitting just a few paces away from the classrooms that had doubled as tiny cells during the regime.

The court is due to rule on appeals by both sides. The prosecution have asked for the sentence to be raised to 45 years. Duch's defence lawyers have requested that the charges be dropped, arguing that he was not senior enough under the regime to fall under the jurisdiction of the court.

Duch is currently set to serve as little as 19 years of his 35-year sentence due to mitigating factors, including a five-year reduction for illegal detention pending his trial.

Branding 69-year-old Duch a 'cunning' man, Chum Mey issued an emphatic appeal for his punishment to be upped to at least the 45-year sentence demanded by the prosecution, or life.

Recounting the forced evacuation of Cambodia's cities under the Khmer Rouge, during which one of his children died, he said that Duch's original sentence was 'not fair.'

'I was one of the inmates at S-21. I burst into tears every day and ask myself why they killed innocent people,' he said. 'I can't accept his apologies when I see those whose fathers died. Hundreds of thousands of people died.'

Fellow former S-21 detainee Bou Meng, a well-known artist, said that the survivors had been 'waiting a long time for this day' and urged the court to give Duch 'firm punishment.'

Tears flowed as others who lost relatives struggled to describe their loss. The meeting was intended to prepare them for the verdict, and psychological support was on hand for those who found the experience overwhelming.

Hao Sophea, whose father died in S-21, grew upset as she addressed the spirits of those who were killed at the prison.

'I've been trying to find justice for you and I want you to rest in peace,' she said. 'I do not want my father's death to be meaningless.' Friday's verdict is expected to mark the end of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal's first case.

Duch stunned the court at the end of his original trial in 2009 when he reversed his 'guilty but sorry' plea and asked to be acquitted and released.

He said responsibility lay with the movement's more senior leaders, because it was they who had devised the regime's policies.

At the appeal hearing the prosecution asked for a longer sentence, saying Duch's expressions of remorse were insincere and describing the original sentence as 'manifestly inadequate.'

Duch was the first person convicted by the international court of crimes committed under the Khmer Rouge, which ruled Cambodia between 1975-79.

An estimated 2.2 million people died from execution, starvation, overwork and disease during the regime.