

Alleged torturer: US policy aided Khmer Rouge rise

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — The former schoolteacher accused of being the Khmer Rouge's torture chief told a genocide tribunal Monday that U.S. policies in the 1970s contributed to the brutal communist regime's rise to power.

Kaing Guek Eav (pronounced Gang Geck EE-UU), better known by his nom de guerre Duch, made the observation as part of a detailed account of his personal journey to revolution. Early on, he said, he realized that the Khmer Rouge's activities would end up in a "disaster."

Duch (pronounced Doik) spoke as the U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal began the second week of his trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as homicide and torture.

Duch, now 66, commanded Phnom Penh's S-21 prison — also known as Tuol Sleng — when the Khmer Rouge held power from 1975-79. As many as 16,000 men, women and children are believed to have been tortured there before being sent to their deaths.

He took the stand last week to deliver a personal statement of remorse, but Monday began his actual testimony, in which he demonstrated a phenomenal memory for detail, reciting without notes people's names and exact dates of activities from four decades ago.

Asked by a judge to put his story in a historical context, he said, — without any apparent intention to justify his actions — that he believed the Khmer Rouge would have died out by 1970 if the United States had not supported Cambodia's military-led government following the 1970 coup d'etat that removed Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power.

He attempted to describe the confusing politics of Cambodia in the late 1960s and early 70s, as the Vietnam War raged on Cambodia's eastern border and the Khmer Rouge tried to recruit peasants and intellectuals angry with Sihanouk's autocratic regime.

"I think the Khmer Rouge would already have been demolished," he said of their status by 1970. "But Mr. Kissinger (the U.S. secretary of state) and Richard Nixon were quick (to back coup leader Gen. Lon Nol), and then the Khmer Rouge noted the golden opportunity."

Because of this alliance, the Khmer Rouge were able to build up their power over the course of their 1970-75 war against the Lon Nol regime, Duch said.

Critics of the U.S. policy say the U.S. agreed to the coup because Washington felt Sihanouk's neutralist policies benefited the communists in Vietnam, who used Cambodian territory as a rear base and a supply line.

But the coup triggered greater Vietnamese communist presence in Cambodia and caused them to vastly increase their support for the Khmer Rouge.

Although the tribunal's mandate covers only the Khmer Rouge time in power — April 17, 1975 to January 6, 1979 — Duch's initial testimony covered an early period when the Khmer Rouge were still fighting for power, and he commanded a jungle jail called M-13.

Duch chose to make his story a personal one, telling how he became interested in politics in 1957 and how in 1964 "decided to join the revolution."

He said his parents were sympathetic to his belief in fighting oppression but afraid because he risked arrest and imprisonment.

"I sacrificed everything to the revolution," he told the court.

When he decided to go to the countryside to become a full-time Khmer Rouge cadre, he went to say goodbye to his parents, he said. "My father was shocked," he recalled, but gave him a lucky wristband. His friends presented him with a watch. Then he left to take his oath of loyalty to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, also known as the Khmer Rouge.

He had been teaching morality to his fellow guerrillas, he recalled, but his abilities were recognized by his superiors, and he was put in charge of interrogation at M-13 in a jungle stronghold.

As prisoners and documents were sent to him, he saw that members of the Khmer Rouge were accusing, arresting and killing each other.

"I said to myself, 'Oh, this is going to be a disaster,'" he testified.

The trial reopened Monday under a cloud of corruption allegations against its personnel.

Peter Taksoe-Jensen, U.N. assistant secretary-general for legal affairs, is visiting Cambodia to meet with government and tribunal officials about allegations that Cambodian personnel taking part in the U.N.-backed tribunal were forced to pay kickbacks to obtain their positions.

Defense lawyers and human rights groups suggest that the allegations, if unanswered, could sink the tribunal's credibility. They also pose a financial threat, since foreign aid donors who provide the budget for Cambodian personnel are withholding their funds pending a resolution of the issue.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial, and the only one to apologize for his actions.

Four more senior leaders of the group are also in custody and expected to be tried sometime over the next year. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions under the Khmer Rouge.