



Cambodia prepares for historic verdict from genocide tribunal

By Miranda Leitsinger

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Phnom Penh, Cambodia (CNN) -- Carrying burning incense sticks and pink lotuses and wearing scarves of mourning, dozens of people marked the deaths of 14,000 victims of the 1970s Khmer Rouge regime at the S-21 torture prison in the Cambodian capital Sunday, one day before a genocide tribunal renders the verdict in its first case, against the man who ran S-21.

Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, was the head of S-21 and is standing trial on various charges including crimes against humanity. Few people brought to the prison made it out alive -- only about a dozen were found by the Vietnamese who invaded Cambodia in 1979.

"We call on the souls of ... those brothers and sisters who have died in Tuol Sleng (S-21) and (the killing fields of) Choeung Ek after enduring unspeakable atrocities and who are now in the afterworld to please come back and to listen to the verdict," said Chum Sirath of the victims association of the Khmer Rouge regime. "When you have heard the verdict, we ardently pray for your souls to enjoy peace and happiness with words denied to you during your time on this earth."

Parents, siblings, friends and loved ones gathered before monks in a courtyard of the prison site - now a museum -- to participate in a ceremony to honor the dead. Among them were survivors of S-21, such as Bou Meng, who wept at times during the memorial.

He said he was happy about the tribunal but concerned since he didn't yet know what the verdict would be in Duch's case.

"I have been waiting for justice for 30 years," he said. "If the verdict does not please me, I will be disappointed forever."

At least 1.7 million people -- nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population -- died under the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime from execution, disease, starvation and overwork, according to the Documentation Center of Cambodia.

Another four of the ultra-Maoist regime's former leaders are waiting to see if they will stand trial before a U.N.-backed tribunal for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The tribunal began its work in 2007 after a decade of on-and-off negotiations between the United Nations and Cambodia over the structure and the functioning of the court.

Youk Chhang, director of the documentation center, said people were awaiting the outcome of Monday's decision in which Duch could receive a minimum of five years in prison and a maximum of life.

His organization was holding verdict watch gatherings in seven provinces so that rural Cambodians could observe.

"I believe that justice will be brought by the tribunal court," Eng Chanthy, 47, who lost her father, six brothers and grandfather to the Khmer Rouge due to starvation, said. "I heard Duch was apologizing to the Cambodian people and asking the people to pardon to him, and I don't agree with him asking for freedom."

"I feel that Duch should die in prison. I don't want to see him live in freedom," said Chanthy, who brought her two children to see S-21 and ended up coming to the memorial service.

Chhang said the verdict may not suit everyone, but he thinks Cambodians will be able to turn over a new leaf once the verdict is announced.

"This is what we have, and then we must move (on). We have our own identity now, our own family, our own society now. We have to build it, make it strong, to prevent (the past) from happening" again," he said. "Tomorrow I am no longer a victim."