



Khmer Rouge defendant says guards taught to hate

Sopheng Cheang

April 21, 2009

The former Khmer Rouge prison commander accused of overseeing the torture and execution of thousands of men, women and children said Tuesday that his underlings were taught class hatred that allowed them to kill their enemies.

Kaing Guek Eav, 66, spoke at Cambodia's U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal, which is trying him for crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture related to the Khmer Rouge's 1970s "killing fields" regime.

Better known by his alias, Duch, he is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. Four more are in custody and are scheduled to be tried sometime over the next year or two.

An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died under the 1975-79 communist Khmer Rouge from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions.

During that time, Duch commanded Phnom Penh's S-21 prison, also known as Tuol Sleng, where as many as 16,000 people are believed to have been tortured before being sent off for execution.

But the court has first been hearing testimony concerning a jungle prison known as M13 that Duch ran during the 1970-75 civil war that brought the Khmer Rouge to power. Witnesses have alleged that Duch personally took part in torture and executions — an accusation he denies. But on Tuesday, he explained how he compelled his guards to carry out such acts.

"We educated people to have a firm class stand and then we taught them to be strict about how they could interrogate the prisoners and also taught them how to smash people and to keep them from escaping," he said.

"Smash" was the common euphemism used by the Khmer Rouge for kill or execute. Duch, who had been a schoolteacher before joining the Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement, explained that the communist theory of education was different from traditional Cambodian teachings. Buddhism opposed killing, he said, but communism justified such actions to aid the working class.

If people did not follow the Khmer Rouge's orders, he added, they feared they "would be beheaded."

The significance of the testimony appeared to be that even before they came to power, the Khmer Rouge encouraged a culture of deadly violence toward their enemies that disregarded conventional notions of justice and allowed decisions to kill people to be left in local hands.

Soon after they came to power, the group began executing its enemies from the former regime. Later, the cadre started using executions as almost ordinary punishment for anyone who disobeyed them. As the regime became paranoid, it began purges of its own followers throughout the country, leading to many massacres.

Earlier Tuesday, a guard who worked under Duch at M13 described him as someone whose life was devoted to his work, which he never took lightly.

Chan Khorn, 53, said Duch had a strict character and no one dared disobey him because they were scared of him.

"I myself was so afraid of him I could not even look him in the face," he said.