

The Phnom Penh Post

Duch craved acceptance
Robbie Corey Boulet
September 1, 2009

Psychologist says a desire for praise drove S-21's chief

The man who ran Tuol Sleng is a largely unfeeling perfectionist who has often displayed "an absence of guilt" for the deaths of some 16,000 prisoners at the torture facility, two expert witnesses told the Khmer Rouge tribunal Monday.

Nevertheless, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, has recently adopted a "more personal view" of the Khmer Rouge years, speaking of them as less of an observer and more as a participant who regrets his actions, said Francoise Sironi-Guilbaud, a psychologist and lecturer who has written about torturers and their motives.

She and her colleague, Kar Sunbaunat, director of the Health Ministry's Natural Programme of Mental Health, told the court there was a chance Duch could be successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated into society.

The two experts questioned Duch for nearly 40 hours in February and March 2008, and again during three sessions last week. They said Monday that they had concluded from the sessions that Duch did not suffer from a mental disorder.

Rather, they said, Duch's desire for praise and a sense of belonging fed his singular focus on performing well and pleasing his superiors.

"Duch's life history is, therefore, determined by his need for an ideal," Sironi-Guilbaud said, adding later that Duch had often been driven by only "one single thought" at any given time.

His dispassionate nature predates his membership in the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), she said, noting that he had been attracted to stoicism as a student, a doctrine that she said "claims indifference in the face of anything that can have an effect on emotions".

But he said it served him well during his time at Tuol Sleng. Sironi-Guilbaud quoted him as having said during one of their sessions: "I could not at the same time be a revolutionary and have feelings."

A series of disappointments

The two experts said Duch's mental state had been influenced by romantic, ideological and other disappointments that dogged him in his younger years.

Duch told the court last week about a failed attempt to persuade the girl he was in love with to become a maths teacher like him. On Monday, Sironi-Guilbaud also cited the arrest of his friends under the Lon Nol regime, as well as the theft of his bicycle, which she said prevented him from going to school.

"Disappointment is something that is very much present in Duch's life," said Sironi-Guilbaud. She said these letdowns had "dehumanised" him and had likely helped turn him into a man capable of running Tuol Sleng.

"The torturer has always first been dehumanised himself before," she said. "This, of course, is not an excuse."

Another factor contributing to this "dehumanisation" was the fact that he went by several names during his childhood, she said.

This process, she said, was "tantamount to having several successive parallel identities" and "could at the unconscious level be considered as an imposition of identity by somebody else".

The two experts said the same longing for group affiliation that prompted Duch to join the CPK might have inspired his 1996 conversion to Christianity.

Referring to the conversion, Sironi-Guilbaud said God and Jesus represented "new masters whom he will serve with the same amount of zeal as his previous masters".

She said Duch told her he became a Christian in part because it was "the religion of the strongest" that had "defeated communism in Poland and elsewhere".

"I first believed that communism could save my country, but now I know that it is God," she quoted him as saying.

Sironi-Guilbaud said Duch had been "using religion as a therapy", adding that the concept of "new birth" associated with Christian baptism likely appealed to him.

"We discussed this a lot, the issue of a pardon," she said, adding later, "Maybe that was an element that was important for him in his thought process."

Interim co-prosecutor

Also Monday, the tribunal announced that deputy international co-prosecutor William

Smith would assume the role of acting international co-prosecutor, effective today.

He will temporarily replace Robert Petit, who announced his resignation in June.

The UN has forwarded two nominees for international co-prosecutor to the Cambodian government. The replacement must be approved by the Supreme Council of the Magistracy.