



For victims, lengthy Khmer Rouge trial painful

By Martin Petty

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After six months of testimony in the first U.N.-backed trial of a high-ranking member of the former Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians who suffered from the tyrannical regime have one question: Why is it taking so long?

Closing arguments begin next Monday in the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, former chief of the notorious S-21 prison, where more than 14,000 "enemies" of the ultra-Maoist revolution died.

Any sentencing will not take place until next year. Four other senior Khmer Rouge cadres are in custody awaiting trial.

Most Cambodians want swift justice for the first senior Pol Pot cadre facing a tribunal in the three decades since the end of the regime blamed for an estimated 1.7 million deaths.

"The longer it drags on, the more painful it is," said Eng Mom, 43, who remembers when the Khmer Rouge showed up at her home in 1978, blindfolded her father, bound his hands behind his back, threw him on a horse cart and killed him.

Working at a roadside stall in the capital Phnom Penh where she binds books with her daughter, she said she never watches the trial. She's too busy with work. When she hears about it or catches a glimpse on the news, it's too painful.

"I have too many brothers or sisters gone missing during the Khmer Rouge time," she said. "I don't know much about the trial. I'd like to see justice for my relatives who were killed, but when I see Duch on TV it brings back a flood of bad memories."

The tribunal's five-judge panel seeks justice for a quarter of Cambodia's population who perished from execution, overwork and torture in one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century when the regime ruled from 1975-79 led by now-deceased Pol Pot.

Witnesses in 72 days of hearings spoke of beatings, electrocution, near starvation and other terrors at S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng, run by Duch. Now 66, he is accused of "crimes against humanity, enslavement, torture, sexual abuses and other inhumane acts." Only seven of those held at S-21 survived.

Duch, now a born-again Christian, has expressed remorse for the S-21 victims, most of them tortured and forced to confess to spying and other crimes before they were bludgeoned to death in the country's "Killing Fields" execution sites.

But he denies personally killing or torturing prisoners and said he was following orders in fear for his own life. He faces up to life in prison if convicted.

'DRAGGING ITS HEELS'

"For us sometimes, it feels like the court is dragging its heels or trying to stay longer than planned," said Khieu Kanharith, the nation's Information Minister.

"Cambodians want to forget," he said. "We are not used to all this kind of talk among the lawyers. For us, all these people, they are guilty. Just listen to the witnesses."

Some, such as 67-year-old rickshaw driver Phin Sovan, who lost four brothers and sisters to the Khmer Rouge, applaud the motives of the tribunal, which has asked international donors for a \$143 million budget to run until 2010.

"We like the rule of law," he said. But he questions why the testimony took six months. "We, the people, have no legal power to tell the court to do this or that. We hear about the trial over and over, but it is painful to go on and on. We are so angry."

Due to Cambodia's erratic and politicised judiciary, the tribunal says it needs time to ensure any decision has support from both sides. Domestic and foreign judges and prosecutors are working jointly to try to guarantee the court's independence.

The chamber of three Cambodian and two foreign judges requires four to agree on a verdict. Advocates hope the tribunal -- known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia -- will serve as a model of professionalism.