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'Humanity smashed' at secret prison, Duch tells tribunal

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The former cadre admits the M-13 prison that he headed before Tuol Sleng was "beyond being harsh", amid delays in his trial.

Former Tuol Sleng prison head "Duch" told the Khmer Rouge tribunal Tuesday that M-13, a detention centre he ran during the early 1970s, was not just cruel but "a place where humanity was smashed".

"[M-13] was not a school, it was a Khmer Rouge prison," the former commandant - whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav - told civil party lawyers, responding to questions about 2-metre-deep pits in which prisoners were detained.

"It was not just harsh but cruel and heinous. It was the place where humanity was smashed. It was beyond being harsh," he said, adding however that it was "not his original intention" to create a cruel environment at M-13 prison. It was merely a consequence of the regime being what it was.

"If people [in pits] were exposed to horrendous conditions, it was a consequence, not my original intention."

Speaking at the third week of proceedings against him, Duch was again called upon to respond to witness testimonies regarding the M-13 prison he headed before Tuol Sleng.

However, difficulties with translation, witness recollections and even the weather got in the way of proceedings, with a short rainstorm temporarily impairing court headsets.

Chan Khorn, 53, a former prison guard at M-13, admitted he had trouble remembering the details of conversations with researchers six years ago, though he recalled the way in which people feared Duch during his command of the Kampong Speu facility in the 1970s.

"No one would dare criticise [Duch]. He was the most important chairperson in the place. Who would dare criticise him?" he asked.

Hopes for funds dashed

On top of technical woes, hopes for an infusion of cash into the near-bankrupt Cambodian side of the court have also been dashed.

In a statement emailed Monday to the Post, the UN Development Program said it has denied a request to release US\$400,000 of Australian government funds to the court, which it froze following allegations of graft last year.

"UNDP's position has been that there must be a resolution of the allegations. After careful internal review of the latest developments, and in accordance with the accountability framework that governs UNDP/[Cambodian government] projects, UNDP is not in a position to release funds at this time," it said.

March salaries for staff on the Cambodian side were paid for by an emergency donation by Japan, and court officials had hoped to use Australian money for April wages