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In abrupt reversal, Khmer Rouge prison chief asks tribunal to release him

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After months of admitting guilt and expressing remorse, Kang Kek Ieu, better known as Duch, challenges the legitimacy of the U.N.-Cambodian war crimes tribunal.

Reporting from Phnom Penh, Cambodia - A former Khmer Rouge prison chief who presided over the torture of about 15,000 prisoners who were later executed astonished observers of Cambodia's first genocide trial Friday by asking judges to release him because he had already served enough prison time and arguing that he shouldn't have been prosecuted in the first place.

After months of professed remorse, Kang Kek Ieu, known in tribunal filings as Kaing Guek Eav but best known by his revolutionary name, Comrade Duch, challenged the legitimacy of the 9-month-old U.N.-assisted war crimes tribunal as it ended its hearings in his case.

Duch, 67, argued before the court that its jurisdiction didn't apply because he was neither a senior leader nor among "those most responsible" for the mass killings three decades ago under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime. He also contended that because the crimes involved occurred more than a decade ago, they exceeded Cambodia's statute of limitations.

Friday's turnaround came after months of Duch expressing contrition, admitting that he was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. Most were tortured at the notorious S-21 prison, of which he was commander, before dying in the nearby "killing fields."

As recently as Wednesday, he likened himself to former Nazi Albert Speer, the only member of Hitler's inner circle to cooperate with the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal. Although Duch has claimed to be only a "cog in the machine," he has also said he was prepared for "the highest form of punishment" and would even accept being stoned to death. He has often apologized to the victims' families and all Cambodians.

Duch is one of five aging senior cadres facing trial in the deaths of at least 1.7 million Cambodians who were murdered or died of starvation or overwork. From 1975 to

1979, before being removed after an invasion by the Vietnamese, the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge regime sought to create an agrarian utopia by abolishing religion, money and schools and forcing most of the population onto collective farms.

The other defendants -- allegedly the Khmer Rouge's chief architects and policymakers -- have denied any involvement in the atrocities, making Duch's cooperation crucial in laying the groundwork for their prosecution.

Duch has said he cooperated with the court to clarify the historical record and to promote healing and reconciliation among Cambodians, both mandates of the tribunal.

Prosecutors weren't impressed, however, remaining skeptical of Duch's tears in court and calling his testimony evasive as they sought to prove that he ran the S-21 prison, also known as Tuol Sleng, with zeal and relative autonomy. They also argued that Duch was at the center of the Khmer Rouge's murderous security apparatus, insinuating himself into the regime's top echelon by encouraging more purges.

Prosecutors asked for a 40-year prison sentence.

Duch's defense team, meanwhile, was split by dissension. Cambodian members insisted that Duch was a scapegoat and should be acquitted because S-21 was only one of nearly 200 Khmer Rouge detention centers across Cambodia. His French lawyers said they weren't seeking an acquittal but wanted any sentence reduced so he could be freed as soon as possible.

The differences underlined an ongoing rift between the Cambodian and international sides of the hybrid court.

After years of negotiations between the United Nations and the Cambodian government, the tribunal was set up in 2006 in a final bid to bring accountability and reconciliation to the Cambodian people in regard to the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror.

The tribunal introduced an innovative system allowing selected Cambodian civilians to air grievances and question the accused. But it has also been mired in controversy amid allegations of Cambodian political interference and corruption.

The judges are expected to deliver a ruling in March. The maximum penalty they can impose is life imprisonment.