



Khmer Rouge jail chief in shock acquittal plea

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PHNOM PENH — Former Khmer Rouge prison chief Duch stunned Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court Friday by unexpectedly asking judges to acquit and release him on the final day of his trial.

Prosecutors said the 67-year-old's sudden demand raised doubts about his admissions of responsibility and his pleas for forgiveness for overseeing the deaths of 15,000 people at a notorious torture centre.

"I would ask the chambers to release me. Thank you very much," Duch said at the end of his closing statement to the court after a harrowing nine-month trial.

Shocked judges asked Duch's Cambodian lawyer Kar Savuth to confirm the request, and Kar Savuth said that Duch wanted to be acquitted on the grounds that he was not a senior member of the Khmer Rouge hierarchy.

Prosecutors earlier this week asked for Duch -- a former mathematics teacher whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav -- to get a jail sentence of 40 years for his role in the brutal 1975-1979 communist regime.

Duch is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and premeditated murder. The defence has repeatedly said that he only carried out orders because his life and those of his family were at stake.

Under their leader Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge wiped out nearly two million people as they abolished money and property and set up huge labour camps in their bid to take Cambodia back to a rural "Year Zero".

Duch's jail, known as Tuol Sleng or S-21, was at the heart of the Khmer Rouge security apparatus. Men, women and children were taken from there for execution at a nearby orchard now known as the "Killing Fields".

Duch is the first prominent Khmer Rouge cadre to go on trial at the court.

The three Cambodian judges and two foreign judges officially wrapped up the proceedings later Friday without making a ruling on Duch's request. They are expected to hand down a verdict by March.

During the trial, Duch's defence team had focussed on getting a lighter sentence, by downplaying his position within the regime and by highlighting his remorse, his time already served and his cooperation with the court.

Duch made further apologies for his crimes in his statement on Friday.

Prosecutors said they were "surprised" by Duch's last-minute demand.

"The fact that he (Duch) entered a request for an acquittal reinforces in our mind that the remorse is limited," international prosecutor Bill Smith told a hastily arranged press conference at the court.

"We the co-prosecutors have been taken by surprise. It's still in my mind unclear whether there was agreement or disagreement between the national and international counsel," Smith said.

French defence lawyer Francois Roux said the last-minute change of heart by Duch and his local defence lawyer was a surprise to him too.

"It was completely unexpected, a moment of spontaneity. It was a complete, bad surprise," Roux said.

But he said the move was also linked to Cambodian political interference in the trial, noting that Prime Minister Hun Sen has previously said that he hoped the tribunal would fail.

"This (Duch's appeal for release) calls into question Duch's plea of culpability, but also the competence of the court," he said.

The court, set up in 2006 as a final chance to find justice for victims of the blood-soaked regime, has already been mired in controversy over alleged political interference and allegations about kickbacks in return for jobs.

Vann Nath, an artist who survived Tuol Sleng after he was put to work painting pictures of Pol Pot, said Duch's request "insults the dead".

"He must not be released because he committed huge crimes. We totally depend on the court for justice," he said.

Chum Mey, who survived because of his skills as a mechanic, added: "The court must not release Duch.

"Duch is known worldwide as a guilty person who killed thousands of people."

Pol Pot died in 1998. The joint trial of four other more senior Khmer Rouge leaders is expected to start in 2011, while the court is considering whether to open cases against five other former Khmer Rouge cadres.