



Khmer Rouge jailer convicted of war crimes
July 25, 2010

A UN-backed war crimes tribunal sentenced the former Khmer Rouge chief jailer Monday to 35 years in prison – the first verdict involving a leader of the genocidal regime that destroyed a generation of Cambodia's people.

Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Comrade Duch, listened impassively as the chief judge read out the verdict, convicting him of crimes against humanity and war crimes. He will serve only 19 years of the sentence, because Judge Nil Nonn said the court shaved off the 11 years he's already spent in detention and five more for being illegally detained in a military court.

He had faced a maximum sentence of death, and many victims and their relatives watching the verdict were angry that his sentence was not more severe. Some of them broke down in tears.

During the course of his 77-day trial, Comrade Duch admitted to heading Toul Sleng, a top secret detention centre for the worst “enemies” of the state. More than 16,000 people passed through its gates before they were killed. Torture used to extract confessions included pulling out prisoners' toenails, administering electric shocks and waterboarding.

“I can't accept this,” said Saodi Ouch, 46, echoing what many Cambodians would see as a light sentence. She was weeping so hard she could hardly talk. “My family died ... my older sister, my older brother. I'm the only one left.”

An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from starvation, medical neglect, slave-like working conditions and execution under the Maoist regime that sought to turn the country into an agrarian utopia from 1975-79. Their bodies were dumped in shallow mass graves that still dot the countryside.

The group's top leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 and four other top members of the Khmer Rouge are awaiting trial.

Unlike the other defendants, Comrade Duch (pronounced DOIK) was not among the ruling clique and is the only major figure of the regime to have expressed remorse, even offering at one point to face a public stoning. But his surprise request on the final day of the trial to be acquitted and freed, left many wondering if his contrition was sincere.

A former math teacher, Comrade Duch joined Pol Pot's movement in 1967. Ten years later, he was the trusted head of its ultimate killing machine, S-21, which became the code name for Tuol Sleng.

Only 14 prisoners are thought to have survived ordeals at the prison that included medieval-like tortures, followed by executions and burials outside Phnom Penh.

Prosecutors asked that Comrade Duch face 40 years in prison.

Hundreds of villagers – many who lost family members during the Khmer Rouge – attended the hearing.