



Khmer Rouge Prison Chief Awaits Verdict

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A U.N.-backed war crimes tribunal was expected to issue a decision Monday in the trial of the Khmer Rouge's chief jailer and torturer — the first verdict involving a leader of the genocidal regime that created Cambodia's killing fields.

Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, ran Toul Sleng — the secret detention center reserved for "enemies" of the state. He admitted overseeing the deaths of up to 16,000 men, women and children who passed through its gates and asked for forgiveness during his 77-day trial.

Though widely expected to be found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, many in this still-traumatized nation are anxiously awaiting the sentence. Anything short of the maximum life behind bars could trigger public outrage.

"All I want before I die is to see justice served," said Bou Meng, 69, one of the few people sent to Toul Sleng who survived. "He admitted everything," he said. "If he gets anything less than life, it will only add to my suffering."

The U.N.-assisted tribunal represents the first serious attempt to hold Khmer Rouge leaders accountable for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians from starvation, medical neglect, slave-like working conditions and execution. The group's top leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998.

Duch (pronounced DOIK) is the first of five surviving senior figures of the regime to go on trial. Unlike the four other defendants, Duch was not among the ruling clique. He insisted during the trial that he was only following orders from the top, and on the final day he asked to be acquitted and freed — angering many of the victims.

A former math teacher, 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 Toul Sleng.

Only 14 prisoners are thought to have survived ordeals at the prison that included medieval-like tortures to extract "confessions" from supposed enemies of the regime, followed by executions and burials in mass graves outside Phnom Penh. The gruesome litany of torture included pulling out prisoners' toenails,

administering electric shocks, waterboarding — a form of simulated drowning — and medical experiments that ended in death.

Duch, who kept meticulous records, was often present during interrogations and signed off on all the executions. In one memo, a guard asked him what to do with six boys and three girls accused of being traitors.

"Kill every last one," he wrote across the top.

After the Khmer Rouge were forced from power in 1979 after a bloody, four-year reign, Duch disappeared for almost two decades, living under various aliases in northwestern Cambodia, where he had converted to Christianity. His chance discovery by a British journalist led to his arrest in May 1999.

"This is a crime that, after 30 years, is now officially being recognized by a court of law, and that is what is most wanted by survivors," said Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which has collected evidence of the atrocities.

Though the tribunal has been credited with helping Cambodians speak out publicly for the first time about Khmer Rouge atrocities, it has faced criticism.

In an awkward legal compromise, the government insisted Cambodians be included on the panel of judges, raising concerns about political interference. Possibly fearing a widening circle of defendants could reach into its own ranks, the government sought to limit the number of those being tried.

The costs have also exceeded expectations.

Initially, the \$78 million earmarked for the proceedings was used up in 2009, without issuing a single ruling, drawing criticism that the process was moving too slowly. The international community has agreed to pump in an additional \$92 million for the next two years.

Norng Chan Phal doesn't care about the cost — as long as Duch spends the rest of his life behind bars.

"This is the most important day of my life," said the Khmer Rouge survivor, who was just 8 when his father and mother were taken to Toul Sleng and killed. He will be among hundreds of victims at the court Monday for the verdict.

"I've been living without my parents for 30 years. I want to see him get what he deserves."