



Khmer Rouge torturer had broad autonomy, lawyer says

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November 23, 2009

The Khmer Rouge's chief torturer ran a camp "dedicated to death" with broad autonomy, a lawyer said on Monday in closing arguments at the U.N.-backed "Killing Fields" tribunal in Cambodia.

Prosecution lawyers said 67-year-old Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, was given autonomy to carry out certain punishments while running the notorious S-21 prison, where more than 14,000 "enemies" of the ultra-Maoist revolution died.

The tribunal seeks justice for 1.7 million people, nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population, who perished from execution, overwork or torture in one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century, when the regime ruled from 1975-79 under Pol Pot.

Karim Khan, a civil party lawyer, urged the tribunal's five-judge panel to reject Duch's assertion that he had little choice but to carry out orders, saying Duch was "psychologically of the same mind" as the Khmer Rouge leaders.

"He did what he did not only because he was psychologically of the same mind as senior members of the Khmer Rouge at the time, not only because he wished to belong to the powerful group, but also because it made life comfortable for him," Khan said.

"The accused has sought ways to minimize his role," Khan added in his closing arguments to a courtroom packed with 600 witnesses, many of them survivors. "He could have done much to alleviate the suffering."

Duch is expected to make his final statement on Friday. A verdict is expected by March.

Witnesses in 72 days of hearings spoke of beatings, electrocution, near-starvation and other terrors at S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng, run by Duch, who is accused of "crimes against humanity, enslavement, torture, sexual abuses and other inhumane acts." Only seven of those held at S-21 survived.

ANGRY SURVIVORS

Duch, now a born-again Christian, has expressed remorse for the S-21 victims, most of them tortured and forced to confess to spying and other crimes before they were bludgeoned to death at the "Killing Fields" execution sites.

Duch denies personally killing or torturing prisoners and has said repeatedly he was following orders in fear for his own life. He faces up to life in prison if convicted. Any sentencing will not take place until next year.

Four other senior Khmer Rouge cadres are in custody awaiting trial. They are ex-president Khieu Samphan, former foreign minister Ieng Sary, his wife Khieu Thirith and "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea.

Pol Pot, architect of the Khmer Rouge's "Year Zero" peasant revolution, was captured in 1997 and died in April 1998. One-legged military chief Ta Mok died in 2006.

Khan said victims represented in the trial are not seeking revenge, but some survivors clearly want Duch to suffer if not face execution, although there is no death penalty in Cambodia.

"Duch should be sentenced to death," said In Soy, a 75-year-old woman who lost her husband and children to the regime, speaking outside the courtroom.

The chamber of three Cambodian and two foreign judges -- known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia -- requires four to agree on a verdict.