



KRouge chief killed and tortured inmates: witness

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PHNOM PENH (AFP) — A witness at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court wept Monday as he testified that the former prison chief for the Khmer Rouge regime executed his uncle at a secret jungle camp.

Chan Veoun, 56, said he saw the jailer, known as Duch, shoot dead his uncle while he himself worked collecting food at the prison camp, M-13, in the early 1970s.

"He was my uncle. He was shot by Duch. He killed him in front of my eyes," Chan Veoun said, weeping. He did not give a reason for the slaying.

Duch -- whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav -- charged in response that the testimony was fabricated.

Last month Duch apologized at the start of his trial, accepting blame for overseeing the extermination of 15,000 people who passed through the regime's notorious main prison, Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21.

He has maintained however that he never personally executed anyone and has only admitted to abusing two people.

Chan Veoun told the court Duch regularly beat prisoners and once stripped a woman to her waist to burn her breasts with a torch soaked in gasoline.

"I saw him tie the female and take off her shirt and burn the chest of that lady," he added.

He said prisoners kept shackled in pits were once left to drown in monsoon season floods, and described how staff at the camp would gauge Duch's mood.

"When he spoke to the guards with a straight face, things were okay. But if he had a smile on his face, there were problems," Chan Veoun said.

"After interrogations he was very happy and expressed feelings of happiness."

Duch denied his accounts, saying Chan Veoun had never worked under him.

"This is a complete fabrication -- probably of what he heard and (he) added something on top," Duch told the court.

"About the crimes committed at (M-13) I cannot forget it. It is a serious matter that affects me psychologically."

The court has been hearing evidence about M-13, which Duch ran during the 1971 to 1975 Khmer Rouge insurgency against the then US-backed government, to better understand Tuol Sleng's organising structure.

The Khmer Rouge were in power in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, when Duch is accused of supervising Tuol Sleng prison and sending thousands of people to their deaths in the so-called "Killing Fields."

The former mathematics teacher has denied assertions by prosecutors that he played a central role in the Khmer Rouge's iron-fisted rule.

Duch faces charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and premeditated murder for his role in the Khmer Rouge. He faces life in jail at the court, which does not have the power to impose the death penalty.

Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998, and many believe the UN-sponsored tribunal is the last chance to find justice for victims of the regime, which killed up to two million people.

The tribunal was formed in 2006 after nearly a decade of wrangling between the United Nations and Cambodian government, and is scheduled to try four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders.

However it is now jeopardised by allegations of political interference and corruption in the wake of claims Cambodian staff were forced to pay kickbacks for their jobs.

Talks between the United Nations and senior Cambodian officials to stop corruption at the court ended earlier this month with no agreement on how to create anti-corruption measures.