



Khmer Rouge chief seeks forgiveness from victims

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PHNOM PENH: Khmer Rouge prison chief Duch admitted responsibility for his crimes at his UN-backed trial and asked the families of the regime's victims for forgiveness.

"May I be permitted to apologize to the survivors of the regime and also the loved ones of those who died brutally during the regime. I ask not that you forgive me now, but hope you will later," Duch told the court.

"As a member of the [Khmer Rouge] I recognize responsibility for what happened at Tuol Sleng," he said, speaking in Khmer language.

Prosecutors Tuesday gave harrowing details of the torture and execution of thousands of Cambodians as they laid their case against the Khmer Rouge regime's prison chief for the first time.

Inmates at the notorious jail run by Duch had their nails pulled out and electrodes attached to their genitals, while some were subjected to live autopsies or had the blood drained from them until they died, prosecutors said.

Only a handful of people are known to have survived Tuol Sleng prison, which is now a genocide museum lined with photographs of some of the more than 15,000 men, women and children who died there in the 1970s.

Prosecutors at Cambodia's long-delayed UN-backed tribunal said Kaing Guek Eav—a former math teacher also known as Duch—played a central role as chief of the security apparatus for the 1975 to 1979 Khmer Rouge regime.

"For 30 years, a whole generation of Cambodians have been struggling to get answers about their families' fates," Cambodian co-prosecutor Chea Leang told the court, as Duch jotted notes in the dock.

International co-prosecutor Robert Petit said that people detained at Tuol Sleng, also known as S21, had been tortured "under the accused" direct orders and sometimes by his own hand."

"The policy was that no one could leave S21 alive," Petit told the court.

Duch, 66, has denied personally torturing or executing prisoners but has taken responsibility for presiding over the prison in Phnom Penh. He is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes, torture and murder.

Duch, who faces life in jail, said he acted under orders from superiors in the Khmer Rouge, which rose to power as a spin-off from the conflict in Vietnam and emptied Cambodia's cities to take society back to a rural "Year Zero."

Up to two million people died during its nearly four years in power.

But Chea Leang contended that Duch himself played a central role, running the central prison and a nationwide network of 195 security centers, which systematically starved, tortured and executed hundreds of thousands of people.

Relatedly, the tribunal was formed in 2006 after nearly a decade of wrangling between the United Nations and Cambodian government, and has faced controversy over allegations of corruption and political interference.

The government of Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a former Khmer Rouge fighter, has been accused of trying to protect the regime's former figures from facing justice.