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M-13 site residents travel to Duch's trial Neth Pheaktra and Georgia Wilkins April 24, 2009

Those who live near M-13 prison site get glimpse into trial of feared former jailer.

The last time Hem Yi saw former prison chief "Duch" was when he led high-ranking Khmer Rouge leaders through the jungle to meet with him at a secret interrogation centre.

On Thursday, 30 years on, the same man faced him behind the bulletproof glass of the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

"In the court, I looked at Duch, and he has changed," Hem Yi told the Post.

"Back then, people were scared just to hear his name and did not dare to look him in the face," Hem Reng, a neighbour of the centre known as M-13, added. "He was a strong man at that time. Now he is old."

Hem Yi and Hem Reng were two of 200 people that the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) brought to the Khmer Rouge tribunal Thursday from their Om Lieng village near the interrogation centre M-13, to see the trial against its former commander, formally named Kaing Guek Eav.

Though the court is in its third week, few other people have had the chance. Despite the efforts of the court's outreach program, pool photos at the court have shown the public gallery near empty since the trial began in earnest in March.

"You cannot force them to come here," court spokesman Reach Sambath told the Post.

"Even if they don't come, the court won't fail. They watch the proceedings on TV and read about them in the paper. It's what the judges do that's important," he added.

However DC-Cam Director Youk Chhang said that more needed to be done to engage locals in proceedings.

"There is no clear strategy by the public affairs office to bring people out to the court. They don't even have a daily schedule available," he said.

"It's time for court officials to start reaching out to people themselves. If you never leave the court, how can you reach out?" he asked, adding that as only 5 percent of Cambodians have access to the internet, the court had only succeeded in reaching out to a predominantly Western audience.

Female interrogators at S-21: Duch

Inside the courtroom Thursday, Duch continued to answer questions from judges regarding the establishment and organisational structure of S-21, including how he had commissioned the wives of five of his subordinates to pose as female interrogators for women prisoners at the torture centre.

"A male interrogator sexually abused and raped a female detainee. That interrogator inserted a stick into the vagina of that detainee," Duch told the court.

"After that incident, I removed him and asked for the permission to form female interrogators by gathering all the wives," he said.

Using maps and organisational charts, he explained how the security centre worked and its role in the regime.

"Every security office, including S-21, had the duty to detain, to torture, to interrogate, and finally, to smash - that is, to kill," he said.

"As chairman, my main duty was to report on confessions of those who were tortured. I, myself, annotated those confessions in order for my superior to understand," he said.

Though many villagers have expressed a desire to attend the court, many don't have the finances for transport out there, Youk Chhang says.

"They have called us saying that they have heard the name of their village mentioned on the TV and they want to see Duch in person.

Hem Yi said he was glad she had the chance.

"I am happy to see Duch face the ECCC for his crimes committed during the regime," he said.