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M-13 still feared by the living
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A scene of horror - now hidden by jungle - is recalled by villagers.

A muddy pond and a deep pit in the ground, its dirt walls reclaimed by jungle undergrowth, are the only reminders left of what would have likely been just one of many now-forgotten Khmer Rouge prisons had it not been commandeered by the man who is at the centre of Cambodia's efforts to reconcile with its brutal past.

Kaing Guek Eav is standing trial in the Kingdom's Khmer Rouge tribunal for atrocities that he admits he committed while director of Tuol Sleng prison, or S-21, the regime's chief torture centre.

But before Tuol Sleng, there was M-13, a crude holding pen for human beings marked for slaughter that Kaing Guek Eav, who is better known by his revolutionary name Duch, ran with the same cold efficiency that would define his later tenure at Tuol Sleng.

From 1971 to 1975, Duch conducted interrogations, made reports and sent an unknown number of people to their deaths at M-13, a precursor to the S-21 killing machine that judges at Cambodia's war crimes court say offers insight into the mind of the man who would become the regime's top jailer.

"Every four or five days, between 10 and 20 prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs, would be taken away to be killed," said Mak Moeun, a farmer who has lived near this site, some 70 kilometres from Phnom Penh, since 1971.

"I knew clearly who Duch was, but I never spoke to him. I never went to see what was happening there [at M-13] because I was too afraid," he said Tuesday as he picked his way through the vegetation that has overtaken the former prison.

With a sweep of his arm he defined where there once was a corral that at any given time enclosed 50 or 60 bound, near-naked prisoners.

"They continued to add more as they took others away to be killed," said Mak Moeun, who at the time was working on a nearby farm.

"I saw Duch order his guards to take the prisoners to be killed. I never saw the killing, I only heard the screams and cries."

The passage of years has softened Mak Moeun's anger towards Duch, a man he said he would have killed but whose fate he says is now in the hands of the war crimes court.

"But if the law would allow for him to be executed, I would like to see him executed and put an end to this story," the 67-year-old said.

Old ghosts

Cows graze on scrubland and farmers tend their rice fields nearby, but Lim Peth said that in the immediate aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, few villagers dared go near M-13, and even today are reluctant to approach the site.

"They were afraid of the ghosts of those killed," he said.

At the height of operations at M-13, Lim Peth, then a 13-year-old boy tasked with tending cattle on the same cooperative farm where Mak Moeun grew rice, remembered seeing guards taking prisoners to a pond about 100 metres from the corral to be bathed.

This was one of the few gestures of humanity offered by Duch to the inmates, who Lim Peth said were otherwise cruelly abused - a statement that has been backed up by former prison guards testifying at Duch's trial who said their boss appeared to take pleasure in his ability to exert absolute control over those in his grasp.

"The prison was controlled by Duch and his wife - all aspects of management, all the orders were given by Duch," Lim Peth said.

Inhuman conditions

"I saw Duch torture the prisoners, who had been detained from all over the area and collected [at M-13]," he added.

Inmates were often left bound and exposed to the insects and elements in a deep pit dug into the earth.

The men frequently wore nothing but tattered shorts, while the women were clad in rough black dresses, Lim Peth said.

It was in this same pit that shackled inmates were left to drown during the monsoon season, one former prison guard told the tribunal earlier this week.

But like Mak Moeun, Lim Peth said he never saw the prisoners being killed.

"I was too young and too afraid to try to see this," said the 51-year-old charcoal maker, who returned to nearby Thmar Kup village after the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

But more than three decades on, Lim Peth said he cannot control his anger towards Duch, who he insists ordered the killing of his family members unfortunate enough to be seized by the regime and sent to M-13.

"Speaking about Duch, I feel only pain," he said.

"At that time I know that my relatives were killed by guards acting on the orders of Duch."

Lim Peth said he wants nothing now "except for the tribunal to judge Duch".

"In my heart, I want to kill him - I am that angry - but I know I cannot do that," he said.