



**Minister who baptized Khmer Rouge defendant says conversion genuine**  
**September 15, 2009**

The Christian minister who baptized Comrade Duch, not knowing he was the former head of the Khmer Rouge's S-21 execution centre, told a war crimes tribunal Tuesday that Duch's conversion from Buddhism was sincere rather than a pragmatic decision to gain forgiveness in this life.

'I am proud of him for his willingness to accept his crime and punishment,' Christopher LaPel told the court in Phnom Penh.

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, is on trial for crimes against humanity and breaches of the Geneva Convention before the UN-Cambodian tribunal. At least 15,000 people were tortured and executed at S-21 in the 1970s. Just a handful survived the prison.

LaPel, a Cambodian-American, said he met Duch in Cambodia in 1995 and baptized him into his Protestant church two weeks later.

At the time, Duch was using the name Hang Pin and hiding from his Khmer Rouge past. LaPel said he had no idea of Duch's history but recalled him saying that what he had done in his life 'couldn't be forgiven.'

LaPel said baptism had changed Duch from a man with 'no joy, no peace, no purpose in life.'

'After he got baptized, he was a completely different person,' LaPel testified. 'His heart wanted to share the word of God to his friends and family.'

It was not until 1999 that LaPel learned his convert had been the Khmer Rouge's chief torturer.

LaPel told the court that several of his own friends had been killed at S-21 and his parents and two siblings also died during the Khmer Rouge regime.

But he said he had forgiven Duch for his actions as head of S-21.

'I hate the sin, but I love the sinner,' LaPel said.

The prosecution asked LaPel whether he felt Duch was sincere about his conversion, pointing out that psychologists who assessed him felt the defendant, who was once a mathematics teacher, had converted because of pragmatism and logical deduction.

The prosecutor explained that while Christianity brings the possibility of instant forgiveness, Buddhism - the predominant religion in Cambodia - would require numerous cycles of rebirth to undo Duch's crimes.

LaPel, who has been allowed to visit Duch in detention and pray with him, agreed that true converts are entitled to forgiveness but said he is convinced Duch's conversion is genuine.

'On one occasion [in 2008], Mr Kaing Guek Eav told me he was sorry for the crimes that he did in the past and that he did not rejoice for what he had done,' LaPel said. 'And that he felt sorry for me and for the Cambodian people.'

Duch's trial was expected to end this month with sentencing due to be handed down in 2010. Cambodia does not have the death penalty, so Duch, 67, faces a maximum term of life in prison.

He has admitted guilt and apologized for his crimes, but his attorneys have sought to prove his role in the torture and executions was minimal because, they said, he was only acting on orders.

Four other former Khmer Rouge are in detention awaiting trial, and judges are investigating a further two.

Around 2 million people are thought to have died from execution, overwork and starvation under the Khmer Rouge regime, known as Democratic Kampuchea, which ruled Cambodia during 1975-79.