



Khmer Rouge defendant: Pol Pot feigned ignorance

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The late Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot was lying when he said he was unaware that his 1970s communist regime operated a torture center, the man accused of running it testified Wednesday.

Kaing Guek Eav told Cambodia's U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal, which is trying him for crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture, that he knew of no document authorizing the notorious prison, but that "whatever Pol Pot decided everybody had to implement."

An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died under the 1975-79 communist Khmer Rouge regime from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions.

Kaing Guek Eav, 66, better known by his alias Duch, commanded Phnom Penh's S-21 prison, also known as Tuol Sleng, where as many as 16,000 people are believed to have been tortured before being sent to their deaths.

Pol Pot said in a 1997 interview he knew nothing of the prison.

According to the interview by U.S. journalist Nate Thayer for the magazine Far Eastern Economic Review, Pol Pot claimed that S-21 was set up for propaganda purposes by the Vietnamese, who invaded the country and toppled his regime in 1979. Pol Pot died in 1998.

Duch said that he decided to talk about S-21 to journalists who found him in hiding in 1999 because he could not bear Pol Pot's false account.

"Pol Pot claimed that S-21 was a fabrication of the Vietnamese. I rejected Pol Pot's statement on this topic," he said.

According to Duch, even though there was no written order establishing the prison, "Pol Pot was the one who initiated the idea, Son Sen implemented it and Nuon Chea is the one who did the follow up. This is from my observation and from the surviving documents."

Son Sen was the Khmer Rouge military commander, killed under murky circumstance by his comrades as the group fell apart in 1997. Nuon Chea, the group's ideologist, is one of the four other senior Khmer Rouge being held for trial by the tribunal.

In other testimony Wednesday, Duch said that "Christ" led British journalist Nic Dunlop to discover him after he had disappeared and went underground in 1979.

Duch became a teacher and a born-again Christian after leaving the Khmer Rouge and gave lengthy accounts of his work to Dunlop and a U.N. human rights investigator before turning himself in to Cambodian authorities.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial, and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. The other four in custody are likely to be tried in the next year or two.