



Portrait of KRouge prison chief emerges at trial

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As his trial began at a UN-backed war crimes court, the former Khmer Rouge prison chief apologised for the atrocities he committed - but few Cambodians are likely to grant him forgiveness.

Duch, 66, told the court trying him for crimes against humanity that he felt "regret and heartfelt sorrow" for the murders of around 15,000 people between 1975 and 1979 at Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21.

"I would like to emphasise that I am responsible for the crimes committed at S-21, especially the torture and execution of people there," said Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav.

Duch, who became a born-again Christian before his arrest in 1999, went on to add that he would like to leave "an open window to seek forgiveness".

Few Cambodians have said they will grant that wish, and even though Duch accepts the allegations against him, lawyers spent the first two weeks of his trial sparring over how much responsibility he bears for atrocities.

The tribunal, established in 2006, resumed last last month in the Cambodia capital, and is seen as a last chance to bring the Khmer Rouge's leaders to justice.

The joint trial of four other Khmer Rouge leaders being held with Duch is set to start later this year after his case is complete.

The former maths teacher's apology came after prosecutors described him as central to the Khmer Rouge's iron-fisted rule, which disastrously enslaved the country in collective farms as it attempted to enforce a communist 'Year Zero'.

"The policy was that no one could leave S-21 alive," co-prosecutor Robert Petit told the court as he laid out his case that prisoners were tortured "under the accused's direct orders and sometimes by his own hand".

Inmates had toenails and fingernails pulled out, had plastic bags tied over their heads, were stripped naked and had electric shocks administered to their genitals, Petit said.

Most prisoners were killed by a blow to the base of the neck with a steel club, then had their bellies sliced open, he added.

A former Tuol Sleng guard is expected to later testify that many prisoners were drained of their blood.

"Victims would be strapped to a bed, hooked up to an IV and literally have their life drained out of them," Petit said.

Duch is charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, premeditated murder and torture. If convicted, he faces a maximum sentence of life in jail.

But he has denied personally executing anyone, and has only admitted to torturing two prisoners.

Duch told the court he feared for his life and his family, and acted under orders from superiors in the Khmer Rouge - a regime which killed up to two million people through starvation, overwork, torture and execution.

His defence team has indicated it thinks judges could go easier on him after his demonstration of contrition and cooperation. Yet it will be hard pressed to counter the emerging image of him as an exacting executioner.

To better understand Tuol Sleng's organising structure the court last week heard about M-13, which Duch ran during the 1971-1975 Khmer Rouge insurgency against the then US-backed government.

Francois Bizot, a French anthropologist who was nabbed by Khmer Rouge fighters in 1971 and accused of spying for the CIA, told the court Duch was terrified of his superiors but admitted to torture.

Bizot, who wrote the best-selling book 'The Gate' about his experiences at M-13, said: "Until then I thought I was in the right part of humanity, that there were monsters (like Duch) whom I would never resemble."

The next witness, 72-year-old Ouch Sorn, said he was arrested in 1974 on suspicion of espionage and held shackled in a pit at M-13 for two months before being released to work there sweeping and digging graves.

"I dared not to have any contact with (Duch). I was so afraid of him I dared not to look into his face," the former rice farmer said, adding that at least three prisoners died every day in the year he was at the jungle prison.

He described dogs carrying away prisoners' remains as well as multiple beatings and executions, including one in which a woman was buried alive. Duch, however, disputed the testimony.

"When I interrogated women, I never let a detainee see it.

Number two, I never beat any female detainees and third, when detainees were beaten, no one else was helping me to beat that person," Duch said.

The trial is due to continue on April 20, and is expected to last several months.