



French KRouge prisoner says torture chief no monster

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A French researcher who survived detention by the Khmer Rouge told a court Wednesday that the regime's prison chief was not a monster, but instead was a revolutionary on a "mission".

Francois Bizot, who wrote the best-selling book "The Gate" about his experiences under the communist movement, stared at his hands as he told the tribunal about his interrogation by Duch at a jungle prison camp.

"Until then I thought I was in the right part of humanity, that there were monsters (like Duch) whom I would never resemble," Bizot, an anthropologist, told the UN-backed court.

"(But) I had in front of me a man, a communist, a Marxist, like many of the friends I had in Paris, ready to give his life for the revolution, and who would accomplish the mission he had been given."

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, last week apologised at his trial, accepting blame for the later extermination of 15,000 people who passed through the Khmer Rouge regime's main prison, Tuol Sleng.

The court this week is hearing about M-13, which Duch ran during the 1971 to 1975 Khmer Rouge insurgency against the then US-backed government, to better understand Tuol Sleng's organising structure.

Bizot testified that he met Duch at M-13 after Khmer Rouge revolutionaries arrested him and two Cambodian colleagues 38 years ago, on suspicion of espionage.

"This looked like a camp from which you would never return," Bizot said.

The 69-year-old said that because he was a foreigner he was the best treated of 50 prisoners at M-13, where inmates were shackled to a bar and wracked with malaria.

Bizot said he was never beaten and Duch spoke to him politely, making him write several statements of innocence.

"From all of what I've seen and remembered, his job was to write up reports on the people sent to him for execution purposes," Bizot told the court.

Bizot showed judges a notebook Duch gave him at M-13, in which he wrote childhood memories, poems and arguments intended to prove that he was a scholar of Buddhism.

Duch carefully read the notebook, he said, and as it became apparent he was not a CIA agent, they struck up an acquaintance. Eventually, the night before he was released, they spoke about torture, Bizot said.

"I asked that evening: 'Who does the hitting?' Duch quite unhesitatingly answered that sometimes he did the hitting. He would hit the prisoners because they would lie," Bizot said. "He hated lying. Lying was abhorrent to him."

When judges later questioned Duch about the conversation, also recounted in "The Gate," the Khmer Rouge cadre said he could not remember and that he had not yet read Bizot's book clearly.

"The story happened more than 30 years ago. Could you please give us some time to reconsider the matter among ourselves," Duch said.

The 66-year-old Duch sat in the dock Wednesday morning, answering questions about the structure of M-13.

Asked whether his subordinates feared him, Duch said: "I was a leader with authority." The Khmer Rouge were in power from 1975 to 1979, the period when Duch is accused of supervising Tuol Sleng prison and sending thousands of people to their deaths in the so-called "Killing Fields."

The former maths teacher has denied assertions by prosecutors that he played a central role in the Khmer Rouge's iron-fisted rule.

Duch faces charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and premeditated murder for his role in the Khmer Rouge. He faces life in jail at the court, which does not have the power to impose the death penalty.

Pol Pot died in 1998, and many believe the UN-sponsored tribunal is the last chance to find justice for victims of the regime, which killed up to two million people.

The tribunal was formed in 2006 after nearly a decade of wrangling between the United Nations and Cambodian government, and is scheduled to try four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders.