

Khmer Rouge tribunal hears 1st testimony from survivor of deadliest torture center

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One of the few survivors of the Khmer Rouge's deadliest torture center gave a long-awaited testimony Monday, weeping as he recounted life at the facility where 16,000 others were tortured before execution.

Vann Nath, 63, escaped execution because he was an artist and took the job of painting and sculpting portraits of the Khmer Rouge's late leader, Pol Pot. His special status did not spare him misery.

The conditions were so inhumane and the food was so little," Vann Nath told the tribunal, tears streaming down his face. "I even thought eating human flesh would be a good meal."

Vann Nath said he was fed twice a day, each meal consisting of three teaspoons of rice porridge. Prisoners were kept shackled and ordered not to speak or move.

"We were so hungry, we would eat insects that dropped from the ceiling," Vann Nath said. "We would quickly grab and eat them so we could avoid being seen by the guards."

"We ate our meals next to dead bodies, and we didn't care because we were like animals," he added.

The testimony came at the trial of Kaing Guek Eav — better known as Duch, who headed the S-21 prison in Phnom Penh from 1975-1979. Up to 16,000 men, women and children were tortured under his command and later taken away to be killed.

Vann Nath is thought to be one of only seven survivors of S-21, and one of three still alive today, said tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath. The other two are scheduled to testify later this week.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. Senior leaders Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Sary's wife, Ieng Thirith, are all detained and likely to face trial in the next year or two.

Duch, 66, sat silently and watched Vann Nath impassively as he spoke. Duch is charged with crimes against humanity and is the first of five defendants scheduled for long-delayed trials by the U.N.-assisted tribunal.

Duch has previously testified that being sent to S-21 was tantamount to a death sentence and that he was only following orders to save his own life.

Vann Nath said he was arrested Dec. 30, 1977, from his home in northwestern Battambang province where he worked as a rice farmer. He was accused of trying to overthrow the Khmer Rouge and of being an enemy of the regime — a common accusation against prisoners. He arrived at S-21 on Jan 7, 1978, and was kept there until the regime collapsed about one year later.

Vann Nath said he was tortured at a different camp after his arrest but he was spared torture at S-21.

The court was shown a dozen paintings Vann Nath made after the fall of the regime that depicted events from S-21, some of which he says he witnessed and some related to him by others. The paintings showed executions, prison guards snatching a baby from a mother, and women being tortured by guards who set scorpions loose on their bodies.

The regime's radical policies caused the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people nationwide by execution, overwork, disease and malnutrition.

Most prisoners were tortured into giving fanciful confessions that suited the Khmer Rouge's political outlook, though they generally had been loyal members of the group.

"What I want is something that's intangible," Vann Nath said. "I want justice for those that died."