



Khmer Rouge torture survivor saw “hell on earth”

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One of the few survivors of the Khmer Rouge's notorious Tuol Sleng prison gave chilling testimony of "hell on earth" when he faced his former torturer at a U.N.-backed war crimes tribunal on Wednesday. Like another survivor who testified at the joint United Nations-Cambodian tribunal, Bou Meng said he was alive only because he was an artist and Duch, the torturer, liked his drawings of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

Meng was accused of spying for the United States in 1977 and was taken along with his wife to the S-21 interrogation centre, once a school and now a museum to the horror of the Khmer Rouge regime.

He was one of only seven people to survive the prison, where more than 14,000 men, women and children died during Pol Pot's 1975-1979 "killing fields" reign of terror.

"I saw about 20 men with long hair, looking very sick and emaciated. The cell was like hell on earth," Meng told the court.

The prisoners were kept in chains with empty bullet boxes and plastic bottles to use as toilets.

"I saw a lizard and hoped it would drop on me so I could catch it and eat it," Meng said. "They kept whipping me and asked me when I joined the CIA."

For the first time in three decades, Meng had the chance to question Duch, the first of five Pol Pot cadres indicted by the tribunal.

He never saw his wife again after they entered S-21 and he asked his torturer what had happened to her.

"I expect she was killed by my subordinates," Duch replied.

With no death penalty in Cambodia, Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, faces a maximum sentence of life in prison if convicted on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and homicide.

He has admitted his part in the deaths but maintains he was only following orders.

On Monday another artist Vann Nath said his life was spared only because Duch liked his paintings of Pol Pot.

Waiting to die

Another S-21 survivor, Chum Mey, 79, told the judges on Tuesday his toenails were torn off and that he, too, was held in a dark cell, his legs shackled. He received hardly any food and expected to die at any moment.

"I will never forget my suffering at S-21, as long as I live," he said, his voice breaking, tears rolling down his face.

"When I entered the room, I didn't expect to survive. I just laid on my back, waiting to be killed."

Mey's wife and four children were among the 1.7 million Cambodian's who died under Pol Pot's ultra-Maoist revolution, which ended in the 1979 invasion by Vietnam.

He too was accused of being a spy for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

"Who is the CIA? What did the Khmer Rouge mean by CIA," he shouted at his torturer.

Duch, listening attentively as usual, responded calmly: "Whoever opposed the regime, that's what the Khmer Rouge meant."

Also indicted are Khmer Rouge second-in-command, Nuon Chea, former President Khieu Samphan, and ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife, all of whom have denied knowledge of the atrocities.

Pol Pot, who was known by the regime as "Brother Number One", died in 1998 near the Thai-Cambodia border.