



Khmer Rouge fighter relates "killing fields" horror July 8, 2009

A former fighter for the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s told a Cambodian court Wednesday how he was suspected of turning against the Pol Pot regime, arrested and beaten unconscious, waking up beneath bodies in a burial pit.

Phork Khan, 57, was testifying at the trial of Duch, head of the Khmer Rouge's S-21 interrogation center in Phnom Penh, who faces life in prison if convicted on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and homicide.

Duch has admitted his part in the thousands of deaths at the prison but says he was only following orders. He has also questioned the reliability of some of the witnesses.

Phork Khan said he had become a fighter in 1971. "In Phnom Penh, in 1975, I took part in the liberation," he said. "At first I was quite happy, but after seeing the forced evacuation of the people and spraying of bullets to kill people by Khmer Rouge soldiers, I wasn't satisfied with that change in the situation."

As the regime purged suspected dissenters, he was arrested in 1978 and detained at S-21. "They tied up my legs and hands and put me face down. I was whipped and I could not move freely. I could barely stand the agony," he said.

One day, guards took him to the edge of a pit at the Choeung Ek "killing fields" near Phnom Penh.

"I did not know how many other prisoners were killed after I became unconscious. Only after I regained consciousness, I saw three dead bodies on top of me," he told the tribunal.

Testimony questioned

More than 14,000 people died at the S-21 prison. Eight people have now provided testimony of their detainment, although Duch has questioned whether all of them really spent time there, and one of the judges has raised some doubts.

Judge Nil Nonn noted Tuesday that Phork Khan had failed to mention his horrific live burial in his pre-trial statement.

Tuesday, another survivor, Lay Chan, said he had been detained at S-21 for two months in 1976 and interrogated twice before his release. Duch responded that nobody was released from S-21 and Lay could therefore not have been held there.

Last week the court heard from two S-21 prisoners who said they had been spared because they were artists and Duch admired their portraits of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.

Wednesday the court heard from a female survivor, Chin Meth, 51, who described a routine of forced labor followed by beatings during a 15-day stay at S-21 in 1977.

However, Duch queried her recollection, too, although he said she could have been detained and interrogated elsewhere.

"The fact is that if she was transferred to S-21, she would be dead. She could not be let out," Duch told the judges. "If people were transferred to S-21, they would be smashed."

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, is the first of five detained Khmer Rouge leaders to face trial. "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, whose regime fell after Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, died in 1998 near the Thai-Cambodia border.