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Ex-guard says Duch hit inmate with stick

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A man who said he worked as a guard at Tuol Sleng prison told Cambodia's war crimes court Monday that he saw prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, beat a detainee with a rattan stick as well as personally inspect the rooms in which high-level detainees were held.

The testimony of Sam Meth, 51, could cast doubt upon Duch's previous assertions that he was a hands-off manager who had little firsthand knowledge of abuses perpetrated at the secret detention facility.

Sam Meth said he guarded high-level former cadre who had been sent to Tuol Sleng's "special prisons", which he described as wooden houses and concrete apartments located near the central compound.

He said he witnessed interrogators employing torture methods ranging from severe beatings to electric shocks that knocked victims unconscious. One time, he said, he saw Duch holding a rattan stick inside a villa that housed a male detainee while guards stood at the entrance.

"Duch actually used the rattan stick to beat the detainee," he said. "He did not beat him much before I left and walked to my place. He beat him on the back."

Sam Meth said he also saw Duch conduct occasional inspections of prisoners' quarters.

"I guarded prisoners on the second floor, and from above when I looked down I saw him walking and inspecting those houses from the east to the west, and then he returned," he said.

Duch has previously said that he spent the vast majority of his time as prison chief annotating detainees' confessions in his office in a house away from the prison, and that he only learned the particulars of atrocities committed there after it closed.

Defence attorneys have not yet been able to question Sam Meth, who began his testimony Monday afternoon, though Duch's Cambodian lawyer Kar Savuth told the Post Monday evening that he did not believe the witness's account.

"I do not believe him. Many witnesses who have been called to testify never said Duch tortured or even interrogated prisoners," Kar Savuth said.

He declined to say what he planned to ask Sam Meth on Tuesday, though he said he would not have many questions for the witness.

Digging mass graves

Also Monday, a witness told the court that he dug mass graves at the Choeng Ek killing fields and filled one with naked, bloodied corpses.

Chhun Phal, a 47-year-old rice farmer who said he worked at the killing fields for about one month before the fall of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, recalled that it took a group of workers "an hour or two" to deposit bodies into one 3-by-2-metre pit.

"I had to rush to bury them, and I failed to pay more attention to the condition of the bodies," he said, though he added that some of the victims had sustained injuries to their throats and necks.

"Their mouths were bleeding," he said.

Chhun Phal at first denied having dug mass graves and said the bulk of his work at the killing fields was agricultural.

"I was only asked to do farming and water the rice fields, and when Angka needed me to work more, then I would be assigned to work more," he said.

"But I only came to [an execution site] once."

But Trial Chamber President Nil Nonn referred back to testimony Chhun Phal gave to co-investigating judges in January 2008, during which he reportedly said he had been asked to dig "two or three pits".

After consulting with his court-provided attorney, Kong Sam Onn, Chhun Phal said he stood by his 2008 testimony.

Chhun Phal said he was recruited from his village in Kampong Chhnang province to join the Khmer Rouge in 1975, at which point he was sent to a military training school in Takhmao, Kandal province. He was then sent to work in the rice fields and dig canals at Prey Sar prison farm, or S-24, before being posted as a guard at Tuol Sleng.

Asked to comment on Chhun Phal's testimony, Duch said he acknowledged that Chhun Phal worked at Toul Sleng. As a poor, uneducated teenager, Chhun Phal fit the profile of cadres he hoped to recruit, he said.

Corruption complaint

A legal consultant for the defence team of former Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea said Monday that he met with Appeal Court Deputy Prosecutor Hang Sitha about a criminal complaint that accused officials of involvement in a kickback scheme in which Cambodian employees were forced to hand over portions of their salaries to top tribunal officials.

The original complaint was filed in January, but the Municipal Court ended its investigation in February, and there have been only two meetings pertaining to the appeal.

Andrew Ianuzzi said he was discouraged by the 90-minute meeting, during which, he said, Hang Sitha did not demonstrate strong familiarity with the case file.

Hang Sitha could not be reached for comment Monday evening.