



Khmer Rouge official wants 'harshest punishment'

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The former chief of the Khmer Rouge's main torture center, being tried by a U.N.-backed tribunal on genocide charges, asked the Cambodian people Wednesday to give him "the harshest punishment."

The statement from Kaing Guek Eav, who headed the notorious S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, came as a widow wept before the court, demanding justice for the death of her husband and four children during the communist regime's reign of terror.

"I accept the regret, the sorrow and the suffering of the million Cambodian people who lost their husbands and wives," the defendant told the tribunal. "I would like the Cambodian people to condemn me to the harshest punishment."

Kaing Guek Eav — better known as Duch — is being tried for crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture. Up to 16,000 people were tortured under his command and later killed during the Khmer Rouge's 1975-1979 rule. Only a handful survived.

Duch (pronounced DOIK) later became an evangelical Christian and worked for international aid organizations after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge.

He noted Wednesday that Jesus Christ was stoned before his death by crucifixion. "If Cambodians followed this traditional punishment, they could do that to me. I would accept it," he said.

Duch is the first of five senior Khmer Rouge figures scheduled to face long-delayed trials and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. His trial, which started in March, is expected to finish by the end of the year.

He could face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Cambodia has no death penalty. During Wednesday's court session, Bou Thon, 64, said her husband was a driver at the Khmer Rouge's Industry Ministry when he was accused of being a traitor and sent to S-21. She was assigned as a cook.

Her husband and four children vanished, and Bou Thon said she believed all were killed at Choeung Ek, better known as the Killing Fields, outside Phnom Penh where S-21 prisoners were dispatched for execution.

With tears in her eyes, Bou Thon said she tried to forgive and forget but could not.

Duch, asked by the judge to speak about the Khmer Rouge killings, said they were "like the death of an elephant which no one can hide with only two tamarind tree leaves."