

Khmer Rouge Jailer in Court's First Public Hearing

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Former Khmer Rouge prison chief S-21, Kaing Guek Eav (Duch), 65, stands in the court room at the Extraordinary Chambers in the courts of Cambodia on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, November 20, 2007. (Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP/Getty Images)

PHNOM PENH—Chief Khmer Rouge interrogator Duch stood before the U.N.-backed "Killing Fields" tribunal on Tuesday, the first public appearance by a senior Pol Pot cadre at the court investigating Cambodia's genocide.

Armed guards escorted Duch, also known as Kaing Guek Eav, into a packed courtroom on the outskirts of the capital, Phnom Penh, where he is seeking bail before a panel of five Cambodian and international judges.

"My name is Kaing Guek Eav. I am 66 years old," Duch, dressed in a white shirt and holding his palms together in a sign of respect, told the court.

Duch, head of the notorious S-21 interrogation centre, is appealing against his detention last July when he was charged with crimes against humanity by the tribunal set up to prosecute "those most responsible" for the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge reign of terror, one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century.

"Today is a milestone event in the history of the extraordinary chamber," said Peter Foster, spokesman for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, as the tribunal into the 1.7 million deaths during the Khmer Rouge era is called.

Before his arrest by the court, Duch had been held in a military prison without trial since 1999. His lawyer, Kar Savuth, called this a "violation of international law and Cambodian law".

Four other top Khmer Rouge officials have been arrested and charged, including ex-president Khieu Samphan, 78, who was charged on Monday with crimes against humanity and war crimes. He is to appeal against his one-year provisional detention.

'Mass Murder, Torture'

Duch, a born-again Christian, has confessed in interviews with Western reporters that he committed multiple atrocities during his time as head of the capital's infamous Tuol Sleng, or S-21, interrogation centre.

He showed no emotion as Cambodian judge Huot Vuthy outlined the allegations against him in a statement read from a judges' bench flanked by the flags of Cambodia and the United Nations.

The judge said "countless abuses were committed against civilians, including mass murder, detention and torture" at S-21, the former high school where more than 14,000 people passed through the barbed wire gates. Fewer than 10 survived.

Most victims were tortured and forced to confess to a variety of crimes—mainly being CIA spies—before being bludgeoned to death in a field on the outskirts of the city. Women, children and even babies were among those butchered.

The bail hearing serves as a dry run for the \$56 million court which is due to begin full trials next year after a decade of delays due to squabbles over jurisdiction and cash.

Some 200 local and foreign journalists are covering the 2-day hearing broadcast live in Cambodia and to 10 other countries.

"It is the first time that an act of trial, including the prosecution, defense and judges, will be shown to the public. This will go to a potential audience of millions of people," Foster said.

Outside the court, hundreds of ordinary Cambodians gathered to catch a glimpse of the infamous S-21 commandant.

"I came here to see with my eyes and listen to Duch about what he did during the Khmer Rouge. I want to hear his confession," Ali Osman, a 38-year-old member of Cambodia's Muslim minority, told Reuters.

Duch is expected to be a key witness in the trial of other senior Khmer Rouge cadres, including former foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife—both life-long friends of "Brother Number One" Pol Pot—and "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea.

The four others have denied knowledge of any atrocities as Pol Pot pursued his dream of creating an agrarian peasant utopia.

The regime was toppled in 1979 by a Vietnamese invasion. Pol Pot died in 1998 in the final Khmer Rouge redoubt of Anlong Veng.

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