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Sister says Khmer Rouge interrogator was "gentle man"

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By Ek Madra

PHNOM PENH (Reuters) - Chief Khmer Rouge interrogator Duch is a "gentle man" who was only following orders when he ran the notorious S-21 torture centre during Pol Pot's reign of terror 30 years ago, his sister said on Wednesday.

"My brother was a gentle man," Hong Kimhong, 50, told Reuters outside Cambodia's "Killing Fields" tribunal where Duch, charged with crimes against humanity, was seeking bail ahead of his trial expected next year.

"He worked under the Khmer Rouge regime. If he did not follow orders from above, he would have been killed," she said on the second day of the historic hearing which ended without a ruling.

Duch, also known as Kaing Guek Eav, was the first senior Khmer Rouge cadre to stand before the U.N.-backed court set up to prosecute "those most responsible" for the 1.7 million deaths during the 1975-79 genocide, one of the darkest chapters of the 20th century.

Judges said they would give their decision on bail at a later date, but did not indicate when. Duch was taken back to the tribunal's detention facility outside the capital, Phnom Penh.

There was little reaction from the grey-haired former schoolteacher, now 66, when prosecutors argued against his release in the nationally televised hearing. They said Duch posed a flight risk and could try to destroy evidence.

"He bears at least some direct responsibility for the detention, torture and deaths of over 14,000 men, women and children," co-prosecutor Robert Petit told the five Cambodian and international judges.

"A lot of Cambodians are watching and listening to what is being said and done in this chamber. Most of them have been waiting for 30 years to see justice done," Petit said.

A born-again Christian, Duch has confessed in interviews with Western reporters that he committed multiple atrocities as head of the infamous Tuol Sleng, or S-21, interrogation centre.

At least 14,000 people deemed to be opponents of Pol Pot's "Year Zero" revolution passed through Tuol Sleng's barbed-wire gates. Fewer than 10 are thought to have lived to tell the tale.

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.

But Duch's sister did not believe "he was as brutal as the allegations say" and she said their family had also suffered under the Khmer Rouge.

"Ten of our family died of starvation under the regime. If he isn't released I don't think it will be a fair trial," she said.

Her comments were echoed by Duch's 30-year-old son, Hong Sivpheng. "I want to see my Dad released. This is all about politics".

(Writing by Darren Schuettler; editing by Rosalind Russell and Roger Crabb)

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