



Child survivor of Khmer prison weeps at trial

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A man who was a child prisoner at a notorious Khmer Rouge torture center 30 years ago testified Thursday at the trial of the facility's commander that he hid under a pile of clothes to escape a final purge of inmates before Vietnamese troops ended the regime's reign of terror.

Norng Chan Phal, now a 39-year-old father of two, was eight when the Vietnamese stormed the capital, Phnom Penh. He was held at the S-21 prison, where some 16,000 men, women and children were brutally tortured before execution.

An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions under the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge regime.

Norng Chan Phal testified at the trial of prison commander Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch (pronounced DOIK), that his father was first taken away to the prison, and that he was later taken there with his brother and mother, whom he glimpsed behind bars one last time before she disappeared, and presumably was executed.

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"I could see her on the second floor, holding her hands on the bars of the window, looking at me, and she did not say even a single word to us," Norng Chan Phal said.

He broke down weeping several times while speaking of his parents, prompting his lawyer to ask for a five-minute recess so he could compose himself. Chief Judge Nil Nonn urged him to be strong and carry on and said his testimony was the best chance for him to share the story of his parents and his suffering.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial, and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. He is charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes and murder, and could face a maximum penalty of life in prison; Cambodia has no death penalty.

Four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders are also in the tribunal's custody awaiting trial.

The court heard emotional testimony this week from a handful of S-21 survivors, whose skills helped spare their lives.

Two men, now in their 60s, painted portraits of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot and other communist leaders that glorified them as heroes. Another, now nearly 80 years old, endured beatings, electric shocks and had his toenails pulled out. He was spared death because he was able to fix cars, tractors, sewing machines and typewriters.

Norng Chan Phal recalled Thursday his arrival with his brother at S-21 and how he didn't realize it was a prison. After his mother was put in a cell, the siblings were housed with carpenters in the prison's back yard, where they survived for a year on meals of porridge, he said.

When soldiers from Vietnam - which had invaded Cambodia after a series of bloody border clashes - were on the verge of capturing Phnom Penh in January 1979, Duch, according to his own earlier testimony, carried out orders to kill all the remaining prisoners. Staff were ordered to evacuate the city.

The former jailer told the court after Norng Chan Phal's testimony that he could not have been a prisoner there because no children had survived. The extensive files left behind at the prison list Norng Chan Phal's father as a prisoner, but not him or other family members.

Norng Chan Phal said that he and his brother hid under the pile of clothes among broken furniture in the prison's backyard as Vietnamese forces approached.

In the hours before the Vietnamese arrived but after the Khmer Rouge left, he said he frantically looked for his mother.

"I climbed to the second floor but I could not see my mother, then I ran to the next building and I saw people lying inside the room. I could see them lying with blood and I was scared and I was crying and kept running, searching for my mother," he said.