



Khmer Rouge child prisoner describes last time he saw his mother July 2, 2009

A former child prisoner at a notorious Khmer Rouge torture facility wept Thursday as he described to Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes tribunal the last time he saw his mother before she was murdered by the Maoist regime.

Norng Chan Phal, 39, who is one of just a handful of survivors from the S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, told the court he was separated from his mother shortly after they arrived with his brother at the school-turned-torture facility in 1978.

'Then one day when we were in the yard, I could see her on the second floor holding on to the bars and looking,' he said. 'She did not say a single word to us.'

His testimony came in the trial of former S-21 torture facility chief Kaing Guek Eav, known by his revolutionary alias Duch, who faces charges of crimes against humanity, premeditated murder and breaches of the Geneva Conventions.

At least 15,000 men, women and children were imprisoned and tortured at S-21 before being sent to be murdered at the Choeng Ek 'killing field' on the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

Duch is one of five former Khmer Rouge leaders facing trial for their roles in the deaths of up to 2 million people through execution, starvation or overwork during the group's 1975-1979 rule.

He has admitted guilt and apologized for his crimes, but his defence lawyers have sought to prove he was merely acting on the orders of his superiors.

Norng Chan Phal, said he was imprisoned with his mother and brother after Khmer Rouge soldiers arrested his father and took him from their village.

He said he did not know what happened to his father after they were taken to the prison but he never saw him again.

'We slept on the floor in the workshop and were forced to eat gruel,' he said of his few months of imprisonment at S-21. 'I knew that if I had stayed there long, I would have become sick and died.'

The father of two wept as he recalled seeing guards pushing and beating his mother, saying he was 'terrified of them.'

Presiding Judge Nil Nonn interrupted the testimony and told the witness to compose himself.

'This is your opportunity to tell your story, so please use the time you have to do this,' he said.

Norng Chan Phal described the chaotic scene at the prison on the day the Vietnamese invaded in January 1979 and guards fled, leaving tortured bodies strapped to beds and no food for the surviving prisoners.

'I tried to find my mother, and I looked for her on the second floor where I saw her, but I could not find her anywhere,' he said.

Duch sat impassively through the testimony, occasionally taking notes.

Three other S-21 survivors have appeared before the tribunal this week, and judges have allowed them to directly question their former jailer.

Bou Meng, a 68-year-old artist who survived S-21 after being ordered to paint portraits of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, on Wednesday begged Duch to tell him where his wife had been murdered so he could 'collect her ashes and pray for her soul.'

Duch replied that he did not know where she was murdered, but it was probably at the Choeng Ek killing field.