



Khmer Rouge torturer recounts baby killing policy

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The Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s killed babies and toddlers — sometimes by holding their legs and smashing their heads against trees — so they would not seek revenge later in life, the group's former chief jailer said Monday.

Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, commanded the Khmer Rouge's notorious S-21 prison, where as many as 16,000 men, women and children are believed to have been tortured before being sent to their deaths.

Duch, 66, is being tried by a U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal for crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died under the 1975-79 communist Khmer Rouge regime from forced labor, starvation, medical neglect and executions.

"I am criminally responsible for killing babies, young children and teenagers," Duch told the tribunal, never mentioning if he had personally carried out such killings. He referred to photographs he was shown by the tribunal of a technique executioners used to kill child victims by bashing their heads against tree trunks.

"The horrendous images of the babies being smashed against the trees, I didn't recognize it at first. But after seeing the photographs I recalled that it had happened," Duch said. "It was done by my subordinates. I do not blame them because this was under my responsibility."

Duch was shown the pictures in February 2008 when he was taken on a pretrial tour of S-21 and one of the country's notorious "killing fields" as part of an investigative process that involved taking the accused to the crime scene.

Duch recounted a Khmer Rouge policy on detained children: "There is no gain to keep them, and they might take revenge on you," which he said was told to him by the regime's former defense minister, Son Sen.

It is not known how many young children were killed at S-21, since photographs were not routinely taken of babies and young prisoners. Photographers kept meticulous records of adult prisoners, which now line the walls of S-21, which was converted into a genocide museum.

Duch denied one of the grisly allegations in the prosecutor's indictment, that children of S-21 prisoners were taken from their parents and dropped from third floor windows to break their necks. Duch told the tribunal that hurling children from windows would have panicked other prisoners, which would have run contrary to his orders. He said that prisoners were supposed to be kept in the dark of their destiny to be killed.

Duch is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face trial, and the only one to acknowledge responsibility for his actions. Senior leaders Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Sary's wife, Ieng Thirith, are all detained and likely to face trial in the next year or two.