

TIMES ONLINE

Duch - 'US helped Pol Pot's rise to power'

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The Khmer Rouge's most notorious prison chief told a Cambodia war crimes court today US policies in the 1970s contributed to the rise of Pol Pot's genocidal regime.

Kaing Guek Eav, or 'Duch,' the brutal director of the infamous torture centre S-21 said he believed the Khmer Rouge regime would have died out had the US not supported the right wing military government that removed Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power in a 1970 coup.

Duch, who is on trial charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes, made the claims as part of a detailed testimony of his own journey from maths teacher to fanatical communist revolutionary.

Earlier, he told the UN backed tribunal that he had 'sacrificed everything' to the revolution, but had realised early on that it would end in 'disaster'.

During the four years the Khmer rouge were in power from 1975 - 1979, over 1.7 million Cambodians - nearly a quarter of the population - died from starvation, disease and execution. Between 1977 and 1979 Duch himself presided over the deaths of up to 17000 victims who were brought to S-21 to be interrogated and murdered.

Last week, he took the stand to express his remorse at the atrocities committed under his command. As his trial entered its second week he took the stand again, this time to describe his part in the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

Describing the tangled politics of Cambodia as the Vietnam War raged on the country's eastern border, and the Khmer Rouge recruited peasants and intellectuals disillusioned with Prince Sihanouk's autocratic regime, he said he believed Pol Pot's revolution would have come to an end in 1970 if US policy had not presented him with a 'golden opportunity'.

"I think the Khmer Rouge would already have been demolished," he said. "But Mr. Kissinger (the then U.S. Secretary of State) and Richard Nixon were quick (to back General Lon Nol, the right wing coup leader), and then the Khmer Rouge noted the golden opportunity."

Pol Pot seized on the US intervention in Cambodian politics as a propoganda tool to increase recruitment, and build power as it battled Lon Nol's regime between 1970 -

1975. The coup led to a significant increase in support from the Vietnamese communists which was to prove crucial in bringing Pol Pot to power.

Duch had begun the day recounting his personal odyssey to revolution, describing how he became interested in politics in 1957 and decided to join the Khmer Rouge in 1964.

He said his parents were sympathetic to his belief in fighting oppression but afraid for him, because he risked arrest and imprisonment.

"I sacrificed everything to the revolution," the 66-year-old told the court.

When he decided to go to the countryside to become a full-time Khmer Rouge cadre, he went to say goodbye to his parents, he said.

"My father was shocked," he recalled, but gave him a lucky wristband. His friends presented him with a watch.

He was first given the job of teaching morality to his fellow guerrillas, but abilities of the meticulous former school master were swiftly recognized by his superiors, and he was put in charge of interrogation at a security prison known as M-13 in a jungle stronghold.

As prisoners and documents were sent to him, he saw that, even before the Khmer Rouge had taken power, its members were accusing, arresting and killing each other.

"I said to myself, 'Oh, this is going to be a disaster,'" he testified.

Duch is the first of five former Khmer Rouge leaders to be tried by the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and the only one to apologise for his war crimes.

His trial comes as once again allegations of corruption threaten to overshadow the court's proceedings.

Peter Taksoe-Jensen, the U.N. assistant secretary-general for legal affairs, is to meet government and tribunal officials this week to discuss allegations that Cambodian personnel at the ECCC were forced to pay kickbacks to obtain their positions.

Defense lawyers and human rights groups suggest that the allegations, if unanswered, could destroy the tribunal's credibility.