



Khmer Rouge chief says gave all for revolution

AFP

April 6, 2009

PHNOM PENH (AFP) — The Khmer Rouge's prison chief on Monday told Cambodia's war crimes court that he had "sacrificed everything" for the revolution and said US policies paved the way for the regime's rise to power.

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, last week apologised at his trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, saying he accepted blame for the extermination of thousands of people at the notorious Tuol Sleng prison.

On Monday the grey-haired 66-year-old stood, arms folded across his chest, to tell how he left his job as a maths teacher to join the communist movement which became the Khmer Rouge, under which up to two million people died.

"I believed my decision was proper at the time. I sacrificed everything for the revolution, sincerely and absolutely," Duch told the UN-backed court.

Duch told the court he thought the communist movement would have collapsed if the US government had not supported a coup in 1970 by General Lon Nol that toppled the administration of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

"Mr. (Henry) Kissinger and Mr. (Richard) Nixon were quick (to support Lon Nol) and the Khmer Rouge were quick to seize the golden opportunity," he said, referring to the former US Secretary of State and US President.

French judge Jean-Marc Lavergne questioned Duch at length about his past, allowing the Khmer Rouge cadre to lay out his version of Cambodia's turbulent history.

"The only thing I loved in my life was teaching. I hoped that once the revolution happened, they would allow me to continue teaching. This was my idea -- I did not even think about going and doing what I did," Duch said.

Hearings are scheduled this week to focus on M-13 prison, a secret centre which Duch ran from 1971 to 1975 during the Khmer Rouge insurgency against the then government.

The Khmer Rouge were later in power from 1975 to 1979, the period when Duch is accused of supervising Tuol Sleng prison, where 15,000 people were tortured before being sent to their deaths at the so-called "Killing Fields".

Judge Nil Nonn said it was necessary to hear about M-13 to understand Tuol Sleng's organising structure, the personality of Duch and the relevance of his role to the Khmer Rouge leadership.

The former prison chief later said M-13's role was "detaining, interrogating and smashing" people suspected of being spies in Khmer Rouge "liberated zones".

Prisoners were shackled day and night and given little food in "very inhumane conditions," Duch said.

"It was unavoidable and I hated to do it," Duch said. "I did not think I had any choice other than following (leaders') orders so I could survive.

Anthropologist Alex Hinton, from America's Rutgers University, said the proceedings were providing important insights into Duch's character and his respect for authority.

"I think it raises questions of how us humans become involved in projects of mass murder," Hinton told reporters at the court.

Duch has denied prosecution claims that he played a central role in the Khmer Rouge's rule. He faces life in jail if convicted.

The Khmer Rouge rose to power as a tragic spin-off of the conflict in neighbouring Vietnam, launching a disastrous experiment under its leader Pol Pot to transform the country into a communist utopia. Pol Pot died in 1998.

The tribunal was formed in 2006 after nearly a decade of wrangling between the United Nations and Cambodian government, and is scheduled to try four other senior Khmer Rouge leaders after Duch.

However it has faced controversy over allegations of corruption and political interference, especially after the Cambodian co-prosecutor opposed pursuing six more suspects on grounds it could destabilise the country.

UN assistant secretary general for legal affairs Peter Taksoe-Jensen held "constructive" talks with Cambodian officials Monday over claims Cambodian staff were forced to pay kickbacks for their jobs, a court spokeswoman said.