



Ex-prisoners tell of Khmer Rouge horror

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Three men, who were among a handful of survivors of a notorious Khmer Rouge prison, gave evidence this week at the war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh.

The three men are part of a group of seven people depicted in a famous photograph of S-21 survivors from the early 1980s - originally thought to be the only survivors of the Khmer Rouge prison.

Four of those in the photograph have died, although recent research suggests there were other survivors.

The three gave evidence to the UN-backed tribunal, where the former commander of S-21, Kaing Guek Eav (Comrade Duch), is on trial for crimes against humanity.

Their testimony brought to life the horrors of the time, during which two million Cambodians died.

More than 15,000 Cambodians were sent to S-21 between 1975 and January 1979, when the Khmer Rouge regime was finally overthrown.

Bou Meng, an artist who testified on Wednesday, survived 18 months at S-21.

When he was arrested and taken there in mid-1977, he was shackled with other prisoners to a metal bar in what had been a classroom at the former school.

"In that room there were about 30 to 40 of us," Mr Meng told the court.

"In one corner I saw a tall, white foreigner who was detained there as well, near me.

"He received the same thin gruel ration as the rest of us. We had very little rice. I was so skinny. I had no strength."

Agonising

The men spoke of the agonising lack of food and water and of being treated worse than animals.

And they told of torture - beatings and whippings, electric shocks, toenails pulled out with pliers.

The purpose was to get them to confess to being part of an imagined KGB/CIA plot against the state, after which, as standard procedure, they would be killed.

The presiding judge asked Mr Meng whether he was told why he and his wife - whom he never saw again - had been arrested.

"They didn't tell us anything," Mr Meng replied.

"They just told the prisoners that the Orwellian state - known as Angkar - was all-seeing and all-knowing.

"I said, 'My wife and I are orphans. What mistakes have we made?' They replied, 'You, you contemptible. You don't have to ask. You know that Angkar has many eyes like a pineapple. If you hadn't made a mistake, Angkar would not have arrested you'."

Corpses

Vann Nath, also an artist, said prisoners died one after another, and late in the evening the corpses would be unshackled and removed.

He told the judges he ate his meals next to the dead and said he did not care because the prisoners had become like animals.

After more than a month, one of the guards came for him.

Mr Nath gave up hope, knowing he would now be killed.

But Comrade Duch, the prison commander, put Mr Nath to work alongside Mr Meng, painting giant canvases of the senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

Mr Nath survived for a year.

Spurious

The third witness, a mechanic called Chum Mey, told the court how he was tortured and forced to confess to being part of a spurious CIA/KGB network designed to bring down the state.

But as with the two artists, Mr Mey had a skill.

Duch needed someone who could fix sewing machines, a water pump, typewriters. And so Mr Mey was put to work.

All three men broke down in the witness box during the day they were given to recall their memories in testimony.

Mr Meng's wife disappeared at S-21 and was almost certainly murdered there. Mr Mey's wife and four children died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

Mr Nath's wife survived the Khmer Rouge years, but their two children died.

Unsurprisingly, all three men made it clear they cannot escape their pasts.