



Khmer Rouge prisoner "crawled from pit of corpses" to escape July 7, 2009

A survivor of a notorious Khmer Rouge torture prison told Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes tribunal Tuesday he escaped death by crawling from a pit of corpses at a mass execution site and floating down a river on a plank of wood.

Phork Khan, 57, said guards pushed him into a mass grave at a site somewhere on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, which he believed was the infamous Choeng Ek 'killing field.'

'I was put at the edge of the pit and I knew it would be my last day,' he told the court. 'At about 2 am I regained consciousness. My hands were tied but I tried to move, crawling on top of the corpses.'

He said he climbed onto a piece of wood floating in the nearby Tonle Sap river and let the current carry him into the centre of Phnom Penh.

Phork Khan's testimony came in the trial of former S-21 torture facility chief Kaing Guek Eav, known by his revolutionary alias Duch, who is facing charges of crimes against humanity and breeches of the Geneva Conventions, allegedly committed at the school-turned-prison.

Up to 15,000 men, women and children were imprisoned at S-21 before being sent to be murdered at Choeng Ek.

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 and overwork during the Maoist group's 1975-1979 rule.

Phork Khan said he believed he was taken to the killing field on the eve of Vietnam's invasion in January 1979, saying he heard gunshots as he lay in the mass grave.

But judges described the witness's claims as a 'stark contrast' to his complaint filed to the court, and raised concerns about the veracity of the testimony.

When judges asked how he knew the execution site was in fact Choeng Ek, Phork Khan said he became aware of the killing field's name during a recent visit to S-21, which has been converted into a museum.

'I learned it was Choeng Ek very recently when I paid a visit to S-21 and through that visit, I knew that Choeng Ek would be the last destination in which detainees would be smashed,' he said.

The court has this week heard from three witnesses claiming to have either escaped or been transferred from S-21.

Last week four witnesses recounted how they survived S-21's final days of operation before Vietnamese-led forces entered Phnom Penh and stormed the prison.

Duch has previously admitted guilt for his crimes and, if convicted, faces a maximum sentence of life in prison.