



Duch says he was Khmer Rouge torturer to stay alive **September 2, 2009**

A former top Khmer Rouge cadre said on Wednesday he only agreed to become Pol Pot's chief torturer to save the lives of himself and his family.

Duch, the former boss of Phnom Penh's notorious S-21 prison, said he feared he would be killed by the leaders of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and had pleaded with them to assign him to another position.

"My family was living in fear. I made many attempts to avoid being chief of the prison but the Khmer Rouge's leaders rejected my requests," Duch told the joint United Nations-Cambodian war crimes tribunal.

"I did my best to survive. I worked hard, 10 to 14 hours a day, because I feared I would be killed."

Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, is the first of five former members of the Khmer Rouge charged with war crimes committed during the 1975-1979 "killing fields" reign of terror, during which an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died.

Second-in-command Nuon Chea, former president Khieu Samphan and ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife, have also been indicted. Pol Pot, the architect of the ultra-Maoist revolution, died in 1998.

Duch, a former maths teacher detained since 1999, said he joined the communist revolution because he thought it could help his impoverished country to prosper.

He has admitted involvement in the deaths of 14,000 people at the Tuol Sleng prison but insists he was only following orders. He faces life imprisonment if found guilty.

Earlier this week, several of Duch's former students gave testimony about his good nature and dedication to his work, a stark contrast to the harrowing accounts of brutality heard by the court since it first convened earlier this year.

"He was a very good teacher, humble and good hearted," said Tep Sok, 61, who attended Duch's school in the eastern province of Kampong Cham in 1967.

"He invested his efforts in teaching us. He sold study material at a cheap price and he encouraged us to study hard."

Another former student, Tep Sem, said: "Duch treated the poor and wealthy students equally, no discrimination. He even took some poor students to stay and learn with him."