



Duch's testimony challenged

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Prosecutors at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court argued on Monday that the Khmer Rouge prison chief has given inconsistent accounts of his seniority in the late 1970s regime.

Kaing Guek Eav, better known by his nom de guerre Duch, is on trial for overseeing the torture and extermination of 15,000 people who passed through the hardline communist movement's notorious Tuol Sleng prison.

The former jail chief has claimed numerous times that he worked under fear for his life, but prosecutor William Smith pointed to an April testimony in which Duch said he only became afraid after a superior was arrested in 1978.

'I put it to you that you were not scared (before) because you were one of the most highly connected (Central Party) members,' Smith said.

Duch, however, maintained he would have been 'beheaded' if he had not followed orders from superiors.

'We were a tool of the party.... It was the central committee that imposed the terror and if we failed to follow their orders we would be executed,' Duch said.

Earlier in his trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, Duch begged forgiveness from the victims of the hardline communist movement after accepting responsibility for his role in leading the jail.

But he has consistently denied prosecutors' claims that he played a central role in the Khmer Rouge's iron-fisted rule and maintains he tortured only two people himself and never personally executed anyone.

The court does not have the authority to impose the death penalty, but the former maths teacher faces a life sentence for war crimes, crimes against humanity, torture and premeditated murder.

Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998, and many believe the tribunal is the last chance to find justice for victims of the 1975 to 1979 communist regime, which killed up to two million people.