

Khmer Rouge tribunal in recess after hearing grisly testimony

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In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal has headed into a short recess after hearing grisly evidence from guards at S-21, the regime's most notorious extermination center.

Since the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, began in March, Cambodians have flocked to the court to hear testimony of how he ran the notorious S-21 prison in the capital, Phnom Penh.

Reach Sambath, the tribunal's chief spokesman, says more than 13,500 people have attended 51 days of public hearings held since the tribunal opened its doors.

"They consider this court is their court, this court is working for them. That means for the people of Cambodia. That is the reason they keep coming more and more," he said.

Seeing Khmer Rouge leaders brought to justice is a personal matter for many Cambodians. Almost every family in Cambodia lost members during the rule of the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s.

More than a million Cambodians died of hunger and disease, or were executed before invading Vietnamese troops ousted the Khmer Rouge in early 1979.

The court audiences heard guards testify that prisoners were malnourished to the point of starvation and tortured with electric shocks and waterboarding. At times they had their blood drawn, for use in hospitals.

Finally, the prisoners were told they would be freed. It was a ruse that allowed Duch's staff to ferry their victims to the outskirts of town where they were bludgeoned with an ox-cart axle, had their throats slit and bodies dumped in mass graves, now known as the Killing Fields.

About 14,000 people are believed to have perished at S-21, just one of hundreds of camps the Khmer Rouge established after they came to power in April 1975.

The victims of S-21 included up to 200 children and a handful of Westerners who strayed into international waters.

Duch is the first surviving member of the Khmer Rouge leadership to face trial. It took the government and the United Nations more than a decade to establish the tribunal to

handle human rights abuse cases. During that time, many of the top leaders died, but four are awaiting trial.

His trial resumes next Monday, and may head into the final phase within several weeks.