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'Just a series of ghastly screw-ups'

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Following his testimony Thursday at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, one of the foremost historians of Cambodia weighs in on S-21, Duch's machinery of death, and the significance of the trials.

For decades, David Chandler has been among the world's most meticulous chroniclers of Cambodian history. On Thursday, he took his place within it.

Chandler, a 76-year-old professor from Australia's Monash University, was called to testify at Cambodia's war crimes tribunal in the case of Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, the commandant of the infamous S-21 detention facility.

Originally from the United States, Chandler first became interested in Cambodia when he traveled to Phnom Penh in 1960 as an American diplomat.

He subsequently wrote several books about Cambodia, including *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, *Brother Number One*, the first full-length biography of Pol Pot and *Voices from S-21*, a history of Duch's prison.

Chandler called his day in court "a unique experience", adding that he had "only seen these things in movies and TV".

He was brought in as an expert witness to assess Duch, S-21 and the facility's larger significance within the Khmer Rouge regime.

Asked to assess the significance of the tribunal for Cambodia today, Chandler was cautiously optimistic that the court is increasing the historical awareness of the Cambodian population.

"Having [former Khmer Rouge leaders] confront people who have things to say to them is something that's never happened before.

"So, that lifts up the level of information, and it gives the defendants a chance to speak for themselves, and [Duch] of course made the rare move of admitting he was responsible for what happened. So, if that filters out to the people, then this would be quite

interesting.... I think any addition to knowledge is better than naught," he said.

Chandler had never met Duch himself before Thursday, though he formed a firm impression of the S-21 boss through years of research and interviews.

No moral villain

Voices from S-21 documents a litany of shocking torture techniques employed by Duch and his subordinates, yet Chandler was reluctant to cast Duch as simply an amoral villain.

"The thing to avoid ... is just pointing a figure at people that I had no idea why they were behaving this way. I've never been in any physical danger in my life - a couple operations, but I've never been in any war, I've never been in a closed situation like these people ... so you can't get really hasty with a lot of blame. I mean, you can say 'this is terrible', but you can't say 'that's a bad person, I'm not a bad person'," Chandler said.

In response at the end of the day's proceedings, Duch praised Chandler effusively, telling the professor he had "great virtue as a good researcher".

Chandler called Duch's praise "fawning", though he understood the pathologies from which it sprang. "He felt he had to do it because I'm older, I'm higher, he was locked in that syndrome. I mean I was gratified, it was nice, but I wanted to tell him 'back off, it's OK!'"

Though Chandler said there has been much that he has learned since he wrote his last book, he won't be writing anything further about the Khmer Rouge era.

'Repellent' and 'stupid'

"I really want to say 'au revior, Khmer Rouge'... I've had so much time with these people and you get inside them, and they're so repellent, and they're so stupid.

"A story I tell is, I was writing this book ... I was upstairs in my study in the house we had then, and my wife was downstairs reading something, drafts I'd written, and she said, 'They're so stupid!' Word came up the stairs. And I said 'Well, I know, but I've got a contract to write a book; it can't be just 'they're so stupid, here's my book!'"

"But it was spot-on, I mean, everything they did made no sense, either moral or logical, it was just a series of ghastly screw-ups. So that's true, I don't want to stay around these people too much longer."