

Notorious Cambodian Killer Seeks Forgiveness

✖ **April 2, 2009** – A man standing trial for murdering thousands as a leader of Cambodia's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime publicly apologized for his crimes Tuesday, asking survivors to "please open a window and let me ask for forgiveness."

Kaing Guek Eav, now a born-again Christian, was the head of the notorious Tuol Sleng torture prison in Phnom Penh, code-named S-21, during the Khmer Rouge's genocidal reign from 1975 to 1979. Some 14,000 people were tortured and executed under his watch.

"I am responsible for the crimes committed at S-21, especially the torture and execution of the people there," Eav told the United Nations-backed tribunal in Phnom Penh, Reuters reported.

"May I be permitted to [apologize] to the survivors of the regime and families of the victims who had loved ones who died brutally at S-21. I would like you to forgive me."

Known by his alias "Duch," the 66-year-old former math teacher is the first Khmer Rouge official to take responsibility for the actions of the regime. Led by communist dictator Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge killed 1.7 million people before Vietnam deposed it in 1979.

Duch has said his Christian faith motivated him to confess his involvement in the executions, and he is expected to reveal the orders he received from other regime leaders. One of five defendants in the trial that began Monday, Duch is charged with crimes against humanity, torture and murder, and faces a

maximum of life in prison if convicted.

But some observers question the sincerity of the apology, noting that Duch has repeatedly said he was simply following orders, fearing he and his family would be killed if he disobeyed. "I am solely responsible for this crime, but I am just a scapegoat, a person who played a role in the killings," he told the five-judge panel Tuesday, according to Reuters.

On Wednesday Duch's attorneys requested his release from prison, saying his nearly 10-year pre-trial detention violated international law and the Cambodian constitution, South Africa's Independent Online reported. They also argued that any sentence should be reduced by the time he was imprisoned before the trial.

But the Cambodian pastor who led Duch to Christ in 1996 said the former torturer is not trying to run from punishment.

"It really encouraged me to see this man, one of the Khmer Rouge leaders, stood up in front of the public and admit I did a terrible thing please forgive me," said Christopher LaPel, senior pastor of Golden West Christian Church in Los Angeles. "But it's not meant to let him go.

"I know this man, I train him, I lead him to the Lord. I sit down and talk with him. ... Men cannot forgive, but he want to tell the world that God can forgive you. But it's a message that people aren't understanding. When you understand the love of God, you understand forgiveness. When you don't know God's love, it's hard to understand about forgiveness."

A survivor of the Khmer Rouge himself, LaPel knows the pain Cambodians feel. Each year of the regime's reign was like 10, said LaPel, who immigrated to the United States in 1980. While in Cambodia, he saw people killed in front of him, watched others die in work camps and lost his own parents, brother and sister to the regime. "You're living with fear, terror every moment," he said.

But he said coming to Christ brought him peace, and he was able to tell Duch personally that he forgives him. "I wanted him to hear my words from my heart. I told him I forgive you, and I love you," he said, describing forgiveness as a Christian's duty. "How can you pray, God forgive me, if you don't forgive one another?"

Although he believes the Khmer Rouge should be held responsible for their crimes, LaPel said the trial will not heal Cambodia. "The trial is not the answer for the Cambodian people," he told *Charisma*. "Just to find who's right and who's wrong. Christ is the answer for the Cambodian people—for healing, for hope, for peace, for joy."