

12.11 Torture and Death in Cambodia

Source: “Torture and Death Recounted at Cambodian Trial ” by Seth Mydans, *The New York Times*, July 15, 2009

Instructions: Read the excerpts from *The New York Times* article and answer questions 1 – 3.

Questions

1. What crimes was the defendant accused of committing?
2. The defendant claimed that if he had disobeyed orders from the Khmer Rouge he would have been put to death himself. Does this excuse his actions? Explain.
3. In your opinion, should people such as the defendant in this case be punished thirty years after the human rights violations took place?



For the past two weeks, judges and lawyers in the trial of a Khmer Rouge prison chief have probed for details about the suffering of victims of a regime that caused the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people between 1975 and 1979. As personal stories of terror and brutality fill the courtroom for the first time, even the defendant, Kaing Guek Eav, or Duch, has at times dropped his hard mask and broken down in tears. “I send my respects to the soul of your wife,” he told one witness, Bou Meng, whose wife died in the prison and whom Duch had come to know when he pulled him from a row of shackled prisoners and put him to work as a painter. Bou Meng put his face in his hands. Duch, his lips quivering, turned his back on the courtroom, and both men wept.

Duch, 66, is the first of five central figures from the Khmer Rouge regime to be tried here [Phnom Penh, Cambodia] in a United Nations-backed tribunal. He faces charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes as commandant of Tuol Sleng prison, where at least 14,000 people were tortured and sent to their deaths. Duch has taken responsibility for the torture and killings at the camp, and he expressed “heartfelt sorrow” when he took the stand. But he has also placed himself within a chain of command where disobedience often meant death.

In vivid testimony, the court has heard a description of the ripping out of toenails — and viewed the scarred toes of the victim — and has listened to the sobs of a man who said he drank his own urine to survive. It has heard from a man who said he crawled out alive from a pit in a killing field, and from a woman who said she saw a child thrown into the air and speared on a bayonet.