



An American Journalist's Tour of the Khmer Rouge
Men Kimseng
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Rare photographs depicting life under the Khmer Rouge go on display in Phnom Penh this week, along with audio interviews with regime leaders that will become part of a permanent collection in the capital.

The exhibit, "A Reporter's Dangerous Guided Tour Through Democratic Kampuchea," chronicles the work of Elizabeth Becker, an American journalist and author of "When the War Was Over," a book on Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge.

The exhibit runs from Thursday through the end of February, after which the material will become a permanent collection at the Bophana Center in central Phnom Penh.

In it are dozens of photographs from a 1978 trip Becker took with other journalists at the invitation of Khmer Rouge leaders. While much of the trip was managed as the regime sought to prevent an invasion from Vietnam, Becker was able to surreptitiously snap some photographs.

By the time of her visit, the Khmer Rouge had long since emptied all cities and put people to work in collectives, as they executed their vision of a peasant utopia. Under the failed policies, some 1.7 million people, nearly a quarter of the population, would die.

Her photographs depict a quiet capital: an abandoned Central Market, empty buildings, vacant houses under armed guard.

"It was a weird place," Becker told VOA Khmer in an interview. "Now the pictures don't look weird, but it was Cambodia without people. Cambodia is people laughing, people eating, people dancing, people praying. None of that. It was nothing. It was the absence of real life."

Other subjects include Pol Pot and his former foreign minister, Ieng Sary, who is now on trial for atrocity crimes, greeting journalists with smiling faces.

Becker's notebooks and audio recordings come from Washington University, where she was once a student before becoming a foreign correspondent for both the New York Times and Washington Post.

At the center, 25 photographs will be hung on the walls, with another 40 displayed on a large screen. Audio recordings can be heard via computers and headsets.

Becker said she did not want her work tucked away in a US library or university.

“I want Cambodians to be able to walk in off the street and see this,” she said.