

Rare Khmer Rouge Photos Find Permanent Home
Say Mony
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Rare photos taken by American journalist Elizabeth Becker are now on display in Phnom Penh.

The photographs, which depict life under the Khmer Rouge from a trip Becker took in 1978, will be housed permanently at the Bophana Center in the capital.

“I wanted an institution in Cambodia to have these copies for history,” said Becker, who covered the war in Cambodia for the Washington Post and authored a book on the Khmer Rouge.

Her photographs depict Cambodia’s landscape, empty cities and smiles on the faces of the Khmer Rouge leaders, who were poised to oversee one of the worst atrocities of the 21st Century.

Becker was invited by leaders, including Pol Pot, who wished to improve the regime’s esteem internationally and seek aid against Vietnam from NATO members. Becker says she asked Pol Pot questions, but got no real response.

“He said, ‘You will receive printed answers to those questions,’” Becker told VOA Khmer in an interview. “So he only gave me a lecture on the importance of NATO’s coming and helping and how awful Vietnam was.”

Some visitors to the exhibit, which includes photos and audio recordings, were impressed.

“She was so brave to have entered Pol Pot’s regime, which was known for its massacres,” said Dy Ratha, a retired teacher.

Many of the photos depict a fallacy the Khmer Rouge put on display for journalists. For some visitors, it was nothing like reality.

“I only saw people evicted, digging canals, building dams, harvesting and performing so-called regional dancing and singing arts,” said Chhey Somean, a Khmer Rouge survivor.

Stanislas Touzet, a spokesman for the Bophana Center, said the point of the exhibit is to show what Khmer Rouge leaders—three of whom are currently on trial for atrocity crimes—wished to portray to the outside world.

“What they wanted to show was a beautiful Cambodia,” he said. “Now [people] will understand that those leaders were big liars.”

The exhibit runs through the end of February.