



Reporter Recalls Rare Trip to Pol Pot's Cambodia
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When the Khmer Rouge invited a pair of American journalists to Cambodia in the late 1970s for a rare glimpse of the revolution, they found empty streets and schools in a city with no laughter.

"There was nobody there. It was like walking into the Twilight Zone," recalled one-time Washington Post correspondent Elizabeth Becker.

Invited by the hardline communist regime to visit the capital Phnom Penh in 1978, she jumped at the rare chance to see the secretive revolution in action and meet its leader Pol Pot.

But after a tense two-week trip, peppered with numerous staged photo opportunities in a filmset-like atmosphere, Becker left convinced of the regime's insanity. And her British travel companion was dead.

More than three decades later, the now retired journalist has returned to put her photographs and recorded interviews with Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders on display in Cambodia for the first time.

She is also preparing to testify before Cambodia's UN-backed court in a landmark trial against three top leaders -- including ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary, who arranged her visa for that fateful trip.

The three deny charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide for their roles in the 1975-1979 regime, which is blamed for the deaths of up to two million people from starvation, overwork or execution.

Led by "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, the hardline communist movement emptied cities, abolished money and religion and forced millions to work in huge labour camps in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

But the outside world understood little about what was going on in the closed-off country at the time.

By December 1978, in the final days of the regime, a Vietnamese invasion was imminent and the Khmer Rouge belatedly sought support to fend off the enemy -- starting with positive press about the revolution.

"They had isolated themselves from the world and desperately needed friends or help," Becker, now 64, said in a recent interview with AFP.

Becker, who began her career as a war reporter in Phnom Penh in the early 1970s, was invited with US journalist Richard Dudman, who had covered the Vietnam War.

The third guest was Malcolm Caldwell, a Scottish Marxist academic who had written a favourable book about the revolution.

That Becker was granted a visa is somewhat remarkable since she had already published several critical pieces about the Khmer Rouge, based on the horror stories that were trickling in from Cambodian refugees.

"Do not presume they were all-seeing and all-wise," Becker said about the Khmer Rouge leadership. "The one thing people keep forgetting is how incompetent these people were. They were cruel and ruthless and incompetent."

Throughout their stay, Becker said the three foreigners were "under the equivalent of house arrest", escorted by armed guards at all times.

But the intrepid reporter "snuck out a couple of times" and behind the facade of freshly painted buildings and manicured parks in the capital, "they just left everything to rot".

Outings to model cooperatives in the countryside, where well-fed villagers were working in seemingly idyllic surroundings, proved no less surreal.

"I was alarmed by what I didn't see," she recalled. "You kept thinking you're going to turn a corner and real life would show up but it never did.

"There were never kids playing on the street, there were never kids at school, there were never people at the pagoda, there were no markets, no laughing, nothing."

On the final day, Becker and Dudman became the first and last Western journalists to interview Pol Pot during the Khmer Rouge's reign.

"He was much more charismatic and handsome than I'd expected," she said.

Pol Pot lectured them about the threat of war with Vietnam, saying he wanted NATO troops to fight alongside Khmer Rouge soldiers.

"That's how desperate it was, that Pol Pot would imagine NATO would join him," Becker said.

Caldwell had a private meeting with the Khmer Rouge supremo. Hours later, he was shot dead in his guesthouse.

Mystery surrounds the murder to this day although Becker, who briefly encountered the Cambodian gunman in the guesthouse where Caldwell was killed, simply blames the madness of the Khmer Rouge.

"To find some rational reason why Caldwell would be murdered when this was a regime that was irrationally killing its own people... I don't know that that makes sense."

On December 25, 1979, two days after Becker and Dudman left Cambodia with Caldwell's body, Vietnamese forces invaded. By January 7, they had taken the capital and ousted the Khmer Rouge.

Pol Pot fled to the jungle from where he would continue to fight a guerrilla war. He died in 1998 without ever facing justice.

When her turn comes to take the stand, Becker does not expect to suffer from the recollection problems that have plagued some elderly defendants and witnesses.

"I don't have to rely on my memory," she said. "I kept my notes, I kept my recordings. That's the writer's advantage."