

**Beyond the imagination of mankind:
Cambodia killing fields recalled 30 years on**
John Pilger
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Thirty years ago, the Daily Mirror's John Pilger revealed to the world the horrors of Cambodia.

Two million people had died in Pol Pot's killing fields and hundreds of thousands were starving. Pilger's award winning reports warned there was just six months "to save three million people". Mirror readers raised enough money for a plane load of aid, and the reports kick-started a global humanitarian response. Here he recalls his horrifying trip into a country that had been closed to the outside world for four years.

The aircraft flew low, following the Mekong THE aircraft flew low, following the Mekong River west from Vietnam. Once over Cambodia, what we saw silenced all of us on board. There appeared to be nobody, no movement, not even an animal, as if the great population of Asia had stopped at the border. Whole villages were empty. Chairs and beds, pots and mats lay in the street, a car on its side, a bent bicycle. Behind fallen power lines lay or sat a single human shadow; it did not move.

From the paddies, tall, wild grass followed straight lines. Fertilised by the remains of thousands upon thousands of men, women and children, these marked common graves in a nation where as many as two million people - or more than a quarter of the population - were "missing".

At the liberation of the Nazi death camp in Belsen in 1945, The Times correspondent wrote: "It is my duty to describe something beyond the imagination of mankind." That was how I felt in 1979 when I entered Cambodia, a country sealed from the outside world for almost four years since "Year Zero".

Year Zero had begun shortly after sunrise on April 17, 1975, when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge guerrillas entered the capital, Phnom Penh. They wore black and marched in single file along the wide boulevards. At 1pm, they ordered the city be abandoned.

The sick and wounded were forced at gunpoint from their hospital beds; families were separated; the old and disabled fell beside the road. "Don't take anything with you," the men in black ordered. "You will be coming back tomorrow."

Tomorrow never came. An age of owned cars and such "luxuries", anybody who lived in a city or town or had a modern skill, anybody who knew or worked with foreigners, was in grave danger; some were already under sentence of death. Of the Royal Cambodian Ballet company of 500 dancers, perhaps 30 survived. Doctors, nurses, engineers and teachers were starved, or worked to death, or murdered. For me, entering the silent, grey humidity of Phnom Penh was like walking into a city the size of Manchester in the wake of a nuclear cataclysm which had spared only the buildings. There was no power, no drinking water, no shops and no services. At the railway station trains stood empty. Personal belongings and pieces of clothing fluttered on the platforms, as they fluttered on the mass graves beyond.

I walked along Monivong Avenue to the National Library which had been converted to pigsty, as a symbol, all its books burned. It was dream-like. There was wasteland where the Gothic cathedral had stood - it had been dismantled stone by stone. When the afternoon monsoon rains broke, the deserted streets were suddenly awash with money. With every downpour a worthless fortune of new and unused banknotes sluiced out of the Bank of Cambodia, which the Khmer Rouge had blown up as they fled.

Inside, a cheque book lay open on the counter. A pair of glasses rested on an open ledger. I slipped and I fell on a floor brittle with coins. For the first few hours I had no sense of even the remains of a population. The few human shapes I glimpsed seemed incoherent, and on catching sight of me, would flit into a doorway.

In a crumbling Esso filling station an old woman and three emaciated infants squatted around a pot containing a mixture of roots and leaves, which bubbled over a fire fuelled with paper money. Such grotesque irony: people in need of everything had money to burn. At a primary school called Tuol Sleng, with that this I walked through what had become the "interrogation unit" and the "torture and massacre unit". Beneath iron beds I found blood and tufts of hair still on the floor. "Speaking is absolutely forbidden," said a sign.

Without milk and medicines, children were stricken with preventable disease like dysentery. It seemed that the very fabric of the society had begun to unravel. The first surveys revealed that many women had stopped menstruating. What compounded this was the isolation imposed on Cambodia by the West because its liberators, the Vietnamese, leaves over of paper had come from the wrong side of the Cold War, having driven America out of their country in 1975.

Cambodia had been the West's dirty secret since President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger ordered a "secret bombing", extending the war in Vietnam into Cambodia in the early 70s, killing hundreds of thousands of

peasants. "If this doesn't work, it'll be your ass, Henry," an aide heard Nixon say to Kissinger. It worked in handing Pol Pot his chance to seize power. When I arrived in the aftermath, no Western aid had reached Cambodia.

Only Oxfam defied the Foreign Office in London, which had lied that the Vietnamese were obstructing aid. In September 1979, a DC-8 jet took off from Luxembourg, filled with enough penicillin, vitamins and milk to restore some 70,000 children --all of it paid for by Daily Mirror readers who had responded to my reports and Eric Piper's pictures.

On October 30, 1979, ITV broadcast Year Zero: The Silent Death Of Cambodia, the documentary I made with the late David Munro. Forty sacks of post arrived at the ATV studios in Birmingham, with £1million in the first few days. "This is for Cambodia," wrote an anonymous Bristol bus driver, enclosing his week's wage. A single parent sent her savings of £50.

People expressed that unremitting sense of decency and community which is at the core of British society. Unsolicited, they gave more than £20million. This helped rescue normal life in a faraway country. It restored a clean water supply in Phnom Penh, stocked hospitals and schools, supported orphanages and re-opened a desperately needed clothing factory.

Such an extraordinary public outpouring broke the US and British governments' blockade of Cambodia. Incredibly, the Thatcher government had continued to support the defunct Pol Pot regime in the United Nations and even sent the SAS to train his exiled troops in camps in Thailand and Malaysia.

Last March, the former SAS soldier Chris Ryan, now a best-selling author, lamented in a newspaper interview "when John Pilger, the foreign correspondent, discovered we were training the Khmer Rouge [we] were sent home and I had to return the £10,000 we'd been given for food and accommodation".

Today, Pol Pot is dead and several of his elderly henchmen are on trial in a UN/Cambodian court for crimes against humanity. Henry Kissinger, whose bombing opened the door to the nightmare of Year Zero, is still at large. Cambodians remain desperately poor, dependent on often-seedy tourism and sweated labour.

For me, their resilience remains almost magical. In the years that followed their liberation, I never saw as many weddings or received as many wedding invitations. They became symbols of life and hope. And yet, only in Cambodia would a child ask an adult, as a 12-year-old asked me, with fear crossing his face: "Are you a friend? Please say."