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Nearly 1,500 Khmer Rouge Prison Photographs Donated to Documentation Center

by Nash Jenkins, VOA Khmer

The collection consists of 1,427 images of prisoners held at the Tuol Sleng prison from 1975 to 1979.

WASHINGTON DC - More than a 1,400 photographs from a notorious Khmer Rouge prison were anonymously donated two weeks ago to the Documentation Center of Cambodia, bolstering its treasury of documents from an era of brutality whose records were once largely unaccounted for.

The donation was provided earlier this month by an unnamed woman who worked for the People's Republic of Kampuchea, which took over when the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power in 1979. The collection consists of 1,427 images of prisoners held at the Tuol Sleng prison from 1975 to 1979.

The back of each photograph contains handwritten information on each specific prisoner, often written by the prisoner themselves, Chhang Youk, Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, told VOA Khmer. It is the largest single donation of photographs to the center's archives, he said.

"It will prove extremely important in helping living family members identify and locate their lost relatives," he said. "After all these years, the Cambodians are looking for the peace of memories left behind by their loved ones in the grip of the Khmer Rouge—handwriting, names, photographs—so that they can move on with their lives."

The images, taken of each captured individual upon their arrival at the prison, resemble passport photos in size and format.

Tuol Sleng, known to the Khmer Rouge as S-21, has gained a place in the story of the Khmer Rouge regime as its deadliest venue. Of its approximated 17,000 prisoners, seven are known to have survived.

Comrade Duch, who supervised the prison, commanded meticulous documentation of prisoners and their forced confessions. The majority of these records were lost in the upheaval that followed the fall of the Khmer Rouge to Vietnamese-led forces in 1979.

Thirty years later, the absence of a paper trail distinguishes the Cambodian atrocities from other recent instances of mass killing perpetrated by an established government.

There are enough records from the tyranny of Nazi Germany, for example, to provide visitors to the US Holocaust Museum, in Washington, with an identification card featuring the photograph and brief biography of an individual who lived under Nazi rule. But in the years immediately following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, recovering written artifacts from the atrocities themselves proved to be a scavenger's effort.

“Archives were literally blowing around in the wind,” said Peter Maguire, a Khmer Rouge researcher and author of “Facing Death in Cambodia.”

For years, records remained disorganized, with few official attempts to create a cohesive archive of information. When records were found, there was an anarchy to their maintenance: an East German film crew, for example, brought a collection of discovered documents back to Berlin for the production of the 1981 documentary film “Die Angkar,” and countless Cambodians who stumbled upon records would simply bring them home for their personal collections.

This changed in 1994, when the United States Congress passed the Cambodian Genocide Justice Act, a piece of legislation that urged then-president Bill Clinton and the United States “to collect, or assist appropriate organizations and individuals to collect relevant data on crimes of genocide committed in Cambodia.” The program chartered a group of academics at Yale University to establish the Cambodian Genocide Program, which opened its first outpost in Phnom Penh in January of 1995.

That office was the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which has become an important repository for Khmer Rouge documents, including many of those currently used by the UN-backed tribunal for the trials of former regime leaders Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary.

The center has more than 1 million documents and 20,000 photographs in its archives. Led by Chhang Youk since 1997, the organization now operates independently from Yale and the governments of Cambodia and the United States.

Chhang Youk’s efforts earned him worldwide recognition, including a position on Time Magazine’s annual “100 Most Influential People” list in 2006.

“Youk Chhang believed the proper venue for a dialogue between former Khmer Rouge leaders and their victims was a courtroom, not a group therapy session,” Maguire wrote in “Facing Death in Cambodia.”

Maguire described the center as an “independent historical broker,” stressing the importance of the first word. The center operates free of the encroaching influence of government authority, making it an outlier among the tribunals’ central parties.

Since they began in 2006, the trials have faced ongoing criticism for alleged corruption in the form of bribes and illicit donations. But the Documentation Center has been able to avert external influence and successfully maintain its records. Its employees continue to travel the Cambodian countryside with photographs of the slain to help Cambodians identify friends and relatives.

The donation of photographs will join the center’s archives, though it is unclear what practical legal use they will serve in the forthcoming trials. Their greatest value, Chhang Youk says, is the emotional credence they provide to the heirs to the tragedy’s legacy.

“In the case of these pictures, families are more important than the tribunal,” Chhang Youk said. “These pictures bring closure... they contain information that no one, no genocide, can ever completely destroy a human race. There’s always something left behind.”

In stressing the emotional weight brought by the contents of the archive, Chhang Youk points to the case of the woman who donated the pictures, who acquired them following the fall of the regime but never looked through them. She was afraid, Chhang Youk said, to see a picture of her father.