

NATIONAL

Returning Refugees' Most Forlorn Are Chronicled on Film

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Ever since this group of 300 families of sorts were resettled in 1993 in a rice field that gets flooded half the year, their makeshift settlement has been called the "Camp" by locals whose own community became known as the "Village."

It has been 17 years since those Cambodians were relocated to Battambang city's Chamkar Samraong commune from refugee camps in Thailand, and yet some people in the Village still describe them as wanderers, said French filmmaker Christine Bouteiller.

From 2006 to 2009, Ms Bouteiller documented on film the lives of people in the Camp. The English-language version of her 58-minute film, "The Wanderers," will premiere tonight at 7 pm at the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh.

Having come to Cambodia in 2004, Ms Bouteiller first visited the Camp in mid-2006 while working with an NGO for child refugees.

As she discovered in the course of several visits, people living there had been among the last to be repatriated from the refugee camps set up in Thailand in the 1980s—more



A still from Christine Bouteiller's 'The Wanderers' shows US photographer Marti's circa 1979 image of a refugee camp displayed on a street in the 'Camp.'

than 385,000 Cambodians were brought back by the UN following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in October 1991.

Unlike others who still had relatives in Cambodia or sponsors in foreign countries who could help them resettle, they had truly emerged from the civil war and the Khmer Rouge period alone.

"I was alone; I had nowhere to go... I didn't want to live anymore," says Pich Saroeun in the documentary. Having lost his legs to a landmine, he had given up on life until he met the woman who became his

wife in the Khao-H-Dang camp. "He had a good heart," his wife, Pich Lear, explains in the film. "He was alone like me, so we stayed together and took care of each other."

The couple had befriended Kim Chea, who, also alone, had woken up in the refugee camp's hospital with maimed legs.

Toward the end of the UN repatriation program in 1993, they and others who had created their own families in the camps were brought to that rice field in Chamkar Samraong and given 6-by-12-meter lots and wood to build houses, accord-

ing to Ms Bouteiller.

They settled into their new lives, at times getting help from some of the locals. Mr Chea is now a teacher and Mr Saroeun a community leader working to improve physically handicapped people's conditions.

But among some people, the old resentment persists: one Camp woman in the film says all people in the Village are rich and hostile, and an old man in the Village says half of those in the Camp cannot be trusted.

However, the narrator says, "Bit by bit, the differences between the Camp and the Old Village have narrowed. The land which separates us is being put up for sale and electricity is being installed on both sides. One day, our Camp will be no more than a section in the village."

The documentary had to be shot in four sessions over a period of three years as it took some time, Ms Bouteiller said, "to gain the trust of those people who felt they had been cheated and rejected by everyone."

The French-language version of 'The Wanderers' will be presented at the French government's cultural center in Phnom Penh on Thursday at 7 pm. The Khmer version with English subtitles will be screened at the Bophana Center on Saturday at 4 pm.