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## *Carl De Keyzer: Zona*

“If I had wanted to make a sensational piece out of it then I could have bribed a few chiefs, taken a few really shocking pictures and sold them to the press – but that would’ve been it. I wanted to communicate that this was actually happening and was happening now,” says Magnum photographer Carl De Keyzer. “There were always two guards, one on either side of me, so in a sense it was a battle between me and the military, and I kind of liked the game after a while. I had the right to open every door so in theory it was quite open, but in practice these camps are so big – sometimes the size of a whole city and they’re not going to go out of their way to show you the worst places. Sometimes I’d have to wait two or three days for whatever reason – like a bridge had broken down because there was a flood, or there had been a camp fire – some of them turned out to be true but you always had the sense that something was going on behind the scenes.” His pictures were initially scorned in

Moscow – causing outrage amongst the families of prisoners who suspected his work was pure propaganda most likely funded directly by the Russian military. This misunderstanding prompted a press conference, held by De Keyzer, where he explained his motivations and highlighted the duality of his project. “I had made an agreement with the military that I would present the camps in a positive light, so to get around that I exaggerated the whole fiction thing – the positive approach, by showing more colours, more fictional backgrounds – reflecting the atmosphere of something between reality and fiction. At the same time I tried to get a glimpse – if only through the eyes of the prisoners, of what is really happening out there. I have no proof that these terrible places exist – like torture chambers, or whatever you can imagine – but even if I had had access to them I wouldn’t have taken photographs – the imagination is still much stronger than fact.”