

## Angelina Jolie's Sudan Journal

---

"90 days to stop another disaster in Africa: Unfolding crisis in Sudan could see 300,000 deaths". I hear on the news. Simply can't understand what is going on. Is it genocide?

Visit to Chad (race the rain) June. A news headline says, "Sudanese president pledges to implement peace pact with rebels." I'm confused how can they say peace agreement is in progress when thousands are being slaughtered?

News of change.

"Sudan agrees to allow 3,500 African Union troops into Darfur"

"Powell and Annan go in"

"Finally declare genocide"

"Opening up but difficulties"

Days before I leave for Sudan I read recent updates and briefing notes. UNHCR at gunpoint. On October 12, security clearance for a UNHCR team to visit Seliah, north of El Geneina, was revoked because of reported tensions in the Sirba area along the way. On the same day, a UNHCR mission on its way to Hashaba village to check for potential returnees was aborted when police stopped the team at gunpoint. The team was later allowed to continue its mission, but only with police escort so UNHCR decided to cancel the mission and return to El Geneina.

Excerpts from UNHCR briefing notes:

### **Humanitarian Response in Western Sudan**

UNHCR's initial response to the crisis in Darfur was rather slow and limited. However in recent weeks UNHCR has managed to reinforce its presence in the region and is now (within the framework of the collaborative approach) supporting a coordinated response to deal with the emergency.

UNHCR's involvement in Darfur is based on request from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), considering the Office's expertise and experience in providing relief and protection in situations of displacement.

Most recently, the Secretary-General has given UNHCR responsibility for the return of both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their villages in West Darfur.

## **UNHCR's Three Pronged Approach**

UNHCR's operation in western Sudan focuses on three main activities:

1. Provide protection and assistance to the large IDP population in Darfur to prevent further displacement, including movements across the border;
2. Create conditions conducive to the return of IDPs and some 200,000 Sudanese refugees currently in Chad, including monitoring for the protection and security situations in areas of origin;
3. Facilitate the voluntary repatriation in an organized fashion of some 3,600 Chadian refugees of non-Arab origin to their country of origin in safety and dignity.

UNHCR is assisting IDPs and refugees by providing psycho-social support to address the consequences of sexual violence. In the settlements, UNHCR encourages the establishment of women's centers implemented through NGOs.

## **Humanitarian Aid**

Currently UNHCR is airlifting urgently needed relief items such as 20,000 plastic sheets and 40,000 blankets from our stocks in Amman to the IDPs in Darfur. UNHCR is also helping with the distribution of non-food items in the camps.

More than a million people have been displaced by 18 months of violence. The official UN figure is 1.6 million IDPs and 200,000 refugees in Chad.

## **THE UN HAS CALLED DARFUR THE WORLD'S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS**

Marie-Noelle and I fly from England to Cairo and Cairo to Khartoum. We meet Javier and Jake and drive to UNHCR office for briefing. Handed walkie-talkies. I am Golf Romeo 9-1.

They talk about being careful driving on the roads. There was recently an explosion of an anti-tank mine killing two Save the Children staff. It was on October 10, when Masteri (south of El Geneina) was declared a "no go" zone after an alleged rebel attack on a police station.

One and a half hours later. We drive back to the airport. On the tarmac many types of WFP planes for food drops. The sun is just rising. It looks like a vision of hope.

We are all hitching a ride on a WFP plane. It's late to arrive. I don't care, they are busy I'm sure, doing important things. WFP fed more than 1.3 million people in

the Darfur region of western Sudan in September, exceeding its own target of 1.2 million and recording its largest food distribution since the humanitarian crisis began. Using a combination of trucks, aircraft and trains, WFP moved a total of 21,535 metric tons of food aid to 1,336,992 people in crisis-affected areas of North, South and West Darfur.

The 3 members of WFP we're flying with are very kind and welcoming. I often worry I might get in the way, but they did not make me feel that.

We fly into El Geneina, Darfur.

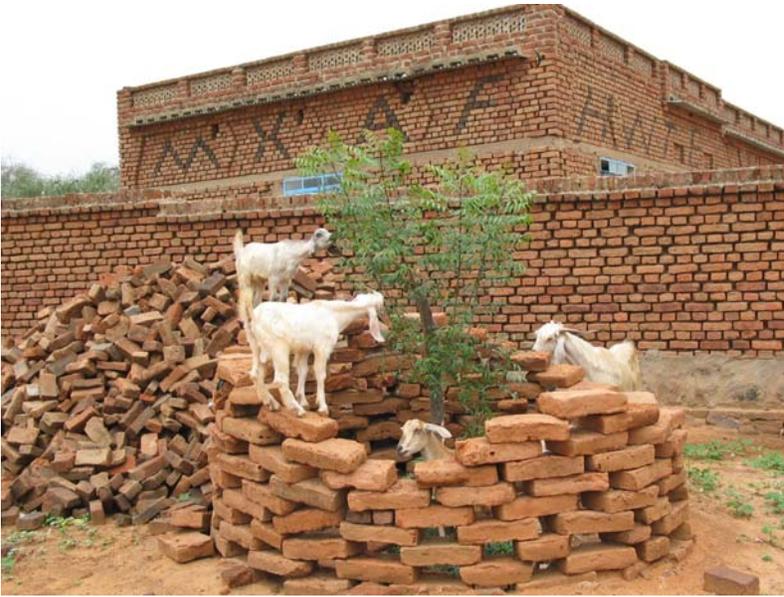
"Hold on there is no runway." Solid landing. Along the side of the dirt strip are old crushed planes that groups of animals are using for shade.

Off the plane we are met by the UN security officer. He asks to speak with me privately and walks me away from the others. "You will be in a very remote area. If there is an emergency you are 5 hours by road. Do you have any medical information, medication or condition that we should be aware of?" Fortunately I don't. I tell him "no." He warns, "Don't wander off for walks on your own. Use common sense for your own personal safety. We understand you wanted to be without a security escort so be careful." I thank him. He then boards the plane we just got off.

I meet Francis with UNHCR. He is a Malaysian man based in Ankara, Turkey. There is something about him that makes me know immediately that we will be friends.

I notice immediately the intense dry heat. I look around. There are mud houses and goats. Anytime a UNHCR car passes children they smile and wave and some run alongside.

Out the window I see, like in most parts of Africa, a poor but proud, handsome people walk along the dusty roads. Driving through the town, not the camp, I think to myself these are the people this is the way of life that is under attack. We pass an ICRC house and WFP cars then stop at a cement house with 3-foot-high circles of barbed wire along the top. This is the UNHCR compound.



UNHCR/ K. McKinsey/ 08.2004



UNHCR/ H. Caux/ 12.2004

“So we have an electricity problem for most of the day. At 8:30 curfews begin and electricity goes off. You will hear only the sound of praying in the mosques. It’s beautiful.” We learn about solar power uses in Sudan. The UNDP project aims at meeting suppressed and growing demand for electric energy in semi-urban Sudan through reliable photovoltaic domestic systems to substitute fossil-based generating units.

Kids smile and say, “HAWADJIA, HAWADJIA.” They always call us that. It means white person.

I am told, “Remember the word TAMAN means ‘wonderful’ or ‘cheers.’ Say it to the children. They will be happy to hear it.”

The biggest problem here is moving around “go” areas and “no go” areas. Also UN workers have to wait for UN security to clear an area before others go. Many people and areas asking for clearance.

I overhear the news. Israel air strikes kill 12 Palestinians. Instability in Afghanistan, war in Iraq -- fighting everywhere. Earthquake in Japan.

---

The staff is very much in need of computer equipment. It's apparently stuck in the pipeline. It is hard to imagine all the logistical problems there are working in this area.

---

At the UNHCR office, the UN security officer gives us all a security briefing. Due to the volatile situation in the region, the staff is advised to adhere to the security instructions in place and keep themselves abreast of the situation all the time. This is very important.

Darfur is divided into localities:

- 36 different main tribes
- 98 with sub divisions

They say the crisis started when there was a drought in the north and Arab tribes moved south. But it was last February when it exploded. JANJAWEEED. Security is trying to work in the “no go” areas to try and open them up and access the people in need. There was a ceasefire in April 2004. There have been several breaches in August and security zones were created.

October 10 Masteri armed clashes. Janjaweed attacked. Masteri was the only main road so it stalled operations for a while.

Janjaweed allegedly attacked Abu Surug and Bir Seiba, north of the western Darfur city of Geneina, on Oct. 16, leaving at least 11 people dead. Then it became tense in Geneina and difficult for aid workers to work with the local military. Many people wounded by last attack were waiting outside of the hospital. They were unable to have access. “Simply too many wounded.”

---

Zone wardens are at the guest house to alert of any changing zone warnings.

### Driving

I see women with bricks piled on their heads. 80% of construction you see is probably done by women. Child labor is also a problem here. For the moment it seems that all aid relief is so needed. A very welcomed sign of hope. The people here have been open to the increased group of internationals.

He goes over evacuation plans. We are in a “rebel stronghold area”. Here, the rebel forces are in control as opposed to the government. Security phase 3 means only emergency.

20 km outside El Geneina. Two vehicles minimum policy for security. Curfew. “You may hear shots tonight because it’s active.” No cell phones, and lines don’t work. Walkie-talkies, the only means of communication. Must have one. When you get out of cars, drivers are instructed to wait facing a way out. If anything starts it escalates quickly. A man with a gun can stand in the road and call it a checkpoint and stop you. Don’t get out unless he asks you to.

Bad roads.

Lack of emergency government aid. Lack of UN designated doctors. No helicopter stationed here for medical evacuation. It takes a long time. Malaria and sunstroke are a problem. In reality, “this is an ongoing war.” “Have a good stay. Good luck. I will try to track where you are.”

Ragnhild asks me upon leaving the office if I read the Human Rights Watch report, “DARFUR IN FLAMES: Atrocities in Western Sudan”. “No.” “I’ll give it to you. It’s very bad. Yes we know that but here is more. It’s very bad.”

Driving.

Barefoot dusty young men leading donkeys with plastic yellow faded water jugs and firewood.

A low flying plane — white with WFP sign on it. Air food drops are resuming. The food was delayed so there was nothing to drop for a while. I imagine what seeing that must mean to the people. To see it in the air again.

We meet Maeve, an Irish woman with UNHCR. She has a warm smile and an obvious strength. We leave for the IDP camp section C. Some estimated 35,000 people. IDP numbers keep growing. It is now up to 1.6 million. MEDAIR, MSF, Save the Children. NGOs including these are in the camp.

There are many cases of SGBV (sexual and gender-based violence). But it is hard to get them to talk. When it comes to sensitive subjects like this one, aid workers have to find the best way to approach it, respecting the beneficiaries’ culture and traditions.

---

I see a man being dragged into a station. An aggressive crowd follows. We drive on.

---

Women are second class citizens. It is a result of the mix of culture and religion in the area. We pass an area where 90 African Union soldiers are based. Three thousand more are on their way for the whole Darfur area. That does not seem like very many for an area the size of Texas. The 90 soldiers that are present only have four cars between them, so they are very limited.

---

We arrive at the IDP centre. UNICEF water projects.

We meet Barbara from Save the Children and Ream, a local woman who leads us to a group of women doing their literacy class. Colorful head scarves. I thank them for allowing the visit. I ask many questions but they are very shy. "We feel safe inside the camp. But when we go out to get firewood we are not safe." They are referring to the many cases of abuse and rape.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

UNICEF and government schools, but there is no secondary school. Schools have been destroyed. UNICEF bringing in tents but still more are needed.

"What are you afraid of?" Certainly afraid of the Janjaweed. Beating and rape. I ask if their children are safe. "They need clothes, food, milk and sugar. We have to stay here until it is safe. We wish we could go home. Even burnt down it is home."

"Anyone still in the villages?" "No", everyone says in chorus as if it is a crazy question. There is nothing. Dangerous. Some are here on their own. The

Janjaweed targeted the men so many lost husbands. Those that are here want to find jobs. “The problem with work or job skills is that we were farmers of animals. Here we have no animals. The ones that were stolen died on the way here, on the road. No food. No water.”

We try to get them to talk to share their experiences. They are passive but also I think they believe “inshallah.” (Arabic) “If God willing.”

Some women took many days on foot to arrive here.

---

Blue UN tarps cover the straw building as a roof. A heavy wind picks it up and shakes it around, making the babies cry. Still the women remain relatively quiet.

Black flies.

---

They have asked to receive sewing machines. Lack of funding won't likely make that possible. They would also like to learn how to make pasta. I find that funny. I wonder if it's from all the Italian NGOs in the area.

They notice a picture of themselves on the cover of a UN briefing mission packet. They seem to like it and pass it around, pointing at each other, giggling.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

We speak with the men gathered under a tree. The sheikhs. Would they like to use the camera we bought and say something to the world? We stand waiting. Other men and children gather. They agree to talk. We ask to sit with them. They consider and then they make a gesture of yes. They speak of the security problem. "Even inside the camp?" I ask. "Yes sometimes they come and beat us." This month is better. No sound of close fire. They fear if they go outside the camp they will be killed. Ultimately they are prisoners of war.

---

One man, old and as black as night with closed eyes and a white beard, occasionally nods in agreement. The men continue to speak of their fear of the future. As they speak, I find my eyes wandering onto the children. Flies walking over their dusty faces, holes in their clothes. One is missing his two front teeth. Keeps smiling and giggling. After a while we say "Shukran" (thank you) and move on.

70-year-old woman. She has been here 11 months. "My eyes hurt, my eyes hurt." Unfortunately the doctors don't have extra funds and it is not an emergency.

A woman introduces her small son and daughter. "Where is your husband?" I ask. "They killed him." They burned their home and took all of their things.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

I notice a small area with two small kids playing in the dirt. I ask, "How many people in those two rooms?" I would guess it was six feet by four feet. "Twelve people," she answers. I stare at them. Unable to comprehend how that is possible. There are 35,000 people registered but there are not 35,000 in the

camp. So maybe the sheikhs are collecting and not distributing the rations. But that is an allegation I won't make.

The woman whose husband was killed also works as a cleaner in town. She walks two hours each way. She makes less than 200 dinars, which is less than US\$1. The grandmother also walks, risking violence, outside the camp to collect firewood.

"We should go in groups or else they find us and beat us on the head." Again the children gather. The girls giggle if I smile at them. The woman says, "I need more work to feed the orphans." "Orphans?" I ask, confused. Then it is explained to me if a parent is killed they call the children orphans. "We are pleased to be here and safe."

Along the dusty road, children are gathered together. What is happening, I wonder. "Two chameleons are mating." I suppose sex and animals are funny in any language.

A little boy warns of big ants on the ground. All over. In fact, a few crawl up my pants. I feel one bite my knee and I squash it, then one on my backside. I can't kill it without embarrassing myself. God it hurts. Eventually I embarrass myself.

We say goodbye. They smile and wave.

---

I take a 30 minute nap. Actually I passed out. Then Mimi brings me to the roof of the office to meet with Rick and Chris. They are here on an emergency mission. Francis joins us. "The refugee mandate is very clear. The legal process has to be the Collaborative Approach to help IDPs. But IDPs are captive to politics."

---

UNHCR came in very late. Working with north and south and is very busy in Chad. But with refugee-like situations for IDPs, the UN Secretary-General asked UNHCR to look after West Darfur.

---

"There is a major gap for protection here. UNHCR is doing a lot but NGOs are way ahead. They are the eyes and ears of the international community now. UNHCR has to get access to areas of origin to see how to make it safe and stable to go back."

"UNHCR wants to work as part of UN to work with government and NGOs. We don't want people displaced and living in IDP camps for 20 years. Building confidence in a community. Ground level work. Get in the field."

“We are late but we’re here. Regularly going to the same villages. Following up on promises.” “Do you have the means for proper assistance?” I ask. “Yes we could certainly start to take big steps forward, but it is the absence of proper security that is in our way.” It’s still going on. The government will say it’s peaceful but if returned too early the people would become hostage to rebel groups. We plan to start with one or two pilot projects and make sure they work well.

There are a lot of NGOs but there are still more needs than assistance ([Click here](#) for the list of NGOs.)

Government says people are coming back from Chad. True? Or not true? If it is true why not let the international community join and see that the people are truly volunteering to return and that they are given the help promised. Are they dropped in a safe place? (There have been rumors of women and children dropped in dangerous areas.)

Still many IDPs are out of reach of any aid relief.

There was a report that 40% were not receiving aid. “How are they surviving?” Many are — somehow. We don’t yet understand these nomadic people, these cultures. They are very resilient people, interesting people. Still, even the strongest will only be able to survive so long. We have to look at their own tribal mechanisms to help resolve this conflict. That is something that UNHCR can do. Start talking to the village leaders, the tribal leaders.

So many tribes and so much fighting. The word genocide is complicated. Leave that to tribunals, courts and lawyers. What is certain is that there are thousands killed, thousands raped and many being starved to death at this very moment. Ethnic cleansing? Yes. Grotesque human rights violations.

Tonight is Ramadan. The local and international staff will eat together. They will break fast at 19:23. But 20:30 is curfew and they will have to leave before curfew to have time to get home. Dinner will be very short. Everyone is watching the clock.

Yes there needs to be accountability for the violations. But it is not as simple or clear as Arab vs. Black, one good or bad. In the west we seem to want good guys and bad guys. It is not that simple.

As for the refugee population in Chad, the government can’t maintain over 200,000 refugees for long. It has already drained the local population.

---

Francis announces we have to stop the meeting. The local staff have arrived and they will come up when you hear the prayer. It is time to break the fast. The

prayer echoes throughout the town. On the roof with the moon out it is lovely, majestic.

Dinner. Twenty-five of us are sitting around by candlelight talking about other parts of the world. Iraq.

“Radio checks.” Only time everyone laughs. “OK. Ten minutes.” Everyone from the “white house” has to head back. After they leave, as the night goes on, I can hear gunfire.

I am told in the morning around 3:00 am, children will make noise, banging pots and pans. “Don’t let it scare you. They are waking everyone up for Ramadan. It’s part fun for them.” We think they are loudest at the UNHCR house. Gunshots and singing in the mosque go on simultaneously. Then the guns stop. They don’t continue but the prayer does.

Preparing to sleep, blowing out candles I realize I need batteries for my flashlight. Feeling silly, looking for batteries, Mimi and I realize that our flashlights say **WATERPROOF** on their bright blue plastic. We laugh. The last place on earth you would need anything water proof. Before bed, by my now-working flashlight I read the Human Rights Watch report. “The Janjaweed militias are drawn from Arab nomadic groups. Their armed encroachment on African Zaghawa, Massalit and Fur pastures and livestock in past years resulted in local armed self-defense measures by the targeted communities when they realized the government would not protect them....” I sleep under a mosquito net and wake up to the sounds of women cooking outside. They are breaking firewood and speaking in a language I don’t know.

Over breakfast with Maeve, Viola, Swadee, Chris, H el ene, Rick, Francis and Marie-Noelle. We eat bread from last night. Bananas and condiments brought in by recent arrivals. Nescafe and sweetened condensed milk in a can (my favorite). It must be because it reminds me of days in the field, like this, talking with UNHCR staff. This morning the conversation turns to the ICC (International Criminal Court). Rick helps me to understand. The ICC is the first-ever permanent, treaty-based, international criminal court established to promote the rule of law and ensure that the gravest international crimes do not go unpunished.

Loud sound of a low plane. Another food drop.

Late start. Not sure what’s happening. I think the basic computer system has crashed. They are unable to communicate and there is talk of need for a car battery. The helicopter has not landed. It lands. We drive off, only to get stuck in “cow traffic” (literally).

At the helicopter we meet Nick, the flight coordinator. He is from Sydney. Last based in Iraq. He has helped to coordinate this part of the mission. "Just a quick briefing," he says. He explains where fire extinguishers and emergency first-aid kits are located and how to open the doors in the event of emergency. I admit I love helicopters so this is a bit of a treat. Unlike other choppers, it drives forward before lift off.

Three minutes into the flight, Nick points out a patch of dirt. "That's where the other helicopter crashed. It was military and packed with weapons. FIREWORKS."

When we arrive we will be going to see the areas where homes have been burnt down and villages destroyed. It's very systematically planned. It's not just chaos. They attack very specific areas. They destroy and pollute the wells and attack the mosques. In one area, for example, they destroyed the honey trees so if the people return, their livelihood is gone.

As we fly over Darfur, the size of Africa overwhelms me. Just this small part of Sudan is the size of Texas or France. Most of our flight is without a glimpse of people or villages. Over 20 minutes of just earth with a look and a feel that belongs only to this part of the world. Africa is a very special place. It has enough resources to take care of itself 10 times over but somehow it has not been guided to learn how to harness these resources. Outsiders continue to benefit from the instability. I don't have the answer but the problem does seem clear.

We fly over HABILAH camp to makeshift homes that blend in with the dirt. Moments later we fly over destroyed villages. Abandoned. Nothing living. Dark circles on the ground where homes have been torched.

We land. The helicopter blades bringing up the dust and cloud. When the haze settles I see about a hundred people lined up near a few scattered trees.

We meet local staff based here in Magarsa. Adam, Marcus and Anders are Scandinavian. Sonja is Egyptian. I am then introduced to Layla who is with INTERSOS, an Italian NGO.

About 30 local men stand watching under a tree. There are hundreds of children lining up, curious about the new visitors. As soon as they see a helicopter they run towards it. Virtually no one has been here because it has been cut off logistically. There used to be over 8,000 people here. Now there are 982. WFP is doing food drops. INTERSOS and UNHCR are here but only recently. INTERSOS first came 3 weeks ago and UNHCR 1 week ago. A lot of the work now is trying to figure out what is left. Hospitals, schools, crops, etc. This is a village of origin for some of the refugees in Chad.

In the south, where fewer aid workers have been able to go, the situation is worse. Still daily rapes and raids. In that area alone, just last month over 100 rapes were estimated.

First, I will go to the two sheikhs of the village. It is explained I am here to learn what has happened.

Their village was attacked and 48 people were killed. "Some could move, some couldn't. Many old people were too sick to move." They went to the 'Wadi' (dry river bed). They spent 6 months. They had been beaten. Their clothes and everything had been taken. On the way to the lake 68 more people were killed. As they speak they stand straight and proud. Sad eyes. "We lost everything," they repeat over and over. One man says, "My feet were tied, chilies were put on my eyes and I was beaten. Six months eating grass and fruit. Eight people died of starvation."

I feel these are peaceful men. Their movements, their way of speaking, even the way they tell their story. They tell it not with hate, just as fact. "Some were shot and burned and we only find their bodies now. There were a lot of rapes of our women. We lost everything. What you see, what we wear now – all the women, all the kids – what they have on today is all we have. One woman is pregnant here from the rape. Eight months pregnant."

Again children gather as we talk. If I look at them too long I'll start crying. They have witnessed so much. They have nothing, yet they sit quietly around their elders and if you catch their eyes, they smile. Still generous of spirit. That just makes it all the more heartbreaking.

They lead us to the villages. The discussion on the walk turns to how some local people get threatened if they talk to internationals. As we walk through shrubs and green plants a few donkeys are grazing and birds are singing. The local children walk with us. A moment of peace. I can sense how these people could live peacefully as families. The nature of who they are is eye opening. I'm not meeting IDPs or victims, but a people. Farmers. Families.

They show me a pump built in 1995. "When the Janjaweed came they took the main pipe, now they are using it as a flag pole at their checkpoint. Rubbing it in." Now it is unfit to drink, but it is all they have, so they do and it causes much diarrhea.

The health centre is by the Janjaweed base. That makes it very difficult for locals to go and take their sick IDP children.

The men tell me about 10 Janjaweed that were around but left when the helicopter landed.

The school was destroyed. No way to teach for the last two years. “Do you have anyone to teach those that survived?” “No. We hope to find one – Inshallah.”

They need clothes and medicine for diarrhea. They say the security in this area is very bad. If anything starts they do not expect to be protected. They will flee again immediately. Why attack these people? Why here? They are apprehensive because the dry season is beginning.

“We need land for the few cows we have left and most areas are taken over.”

---

The men notice I have Arabic on my arm. Is that taken the wrong way here as it might be in the States these days? No, it’s good.

They show me a small twig house. I go in and I can’t imagine how eight people live here. They can sleep outside but during the rainy season they sleep under the plastic of used WFP bags from food drops. They show me an old cracked pot full of leaves. “We have no medicine so we use this for medicine. It is the old way.”



UNHCR/ R. Ek

I am introduced to an elderly woman. She is 60. A life of hard work shows in her face. I find myself watching her calloused hands. She picks at the dirt when she speaks.

She is of the Tama tribe. When the fighting started she left with cattle. They have since been stolen. Three relatives have been killed. I ask if she is getting used to the presence of the international community. Does it feel safer? “No. It is not safe to me.” She stares defiantly at the ground, shaking her head NO. “Please fix the well. The children are sick. Please help us. Everything has been taken – all cooking pots. All my clothes have been burned. The winter is coming. It is already very cold at night and we ask for some clothes. If we can only ask for one thing, we want safety. More than food, we want to feel safe.”

---

INTERSOS manages two camps here. They are working with 36,000 of the 200,000 refugees in Chad. They are looking at this area for the possibility of return. It seems clear that no one can promise security. The local people and staff have been collecting information. What they have found is the IDPs and host communities are both in need. No one feels it is safe. I am offered a bottle of water. I need it so I drink it. I feel everyone’s eyes on me so after a few sips I pass it back.

South of here, on the other side of the river, there have recently been reports of a lot of beatings and rapes. Even one man was raped.

Last year crops had been destroyed, now prices are 3 times. The danger is further destruction. What is the future for these areas? Conclusion is refugees can’t return for a long time.

Sometimes camps are referred to as “open prisons” because if they step out they are raped and beaten.

Some witnessed where there were mass killings and could show the UN and NGOs but now bodies are being destroyed by fire, because internationals are looking for them. The Janjaweed are trying to destroy the evidence.

“So are people returning spontaneously? Voluntarily?” I ask. “We have heard of possible forced repatriation but no hard evidence yet.” Of course with the international community watching, the Sudanese government would love to be able to show returns and say this area is in control. The local staff who are helping the internationals are in serious danger of being attacked or killed.

---

Suddenly everyone is whispering. Two men are approaching. They are Janjaweed.

We start moving and we cross paths. They smile. Carrying their guns, they smile and say hello. It is one thing to look into the eyes of a murderer, but another to watch him smile and walk past, free to do more killing.

---

I meet with a woman who was raped and is now eight months pregnant. I ask her to say only what she wants to say. I would like to understand her difficulties and concerns. "They burned everything and took everything. Some of us women went walking to find fruit. The Janjaweed saw us and said, '**You will have no food today.**'"

She says a guy in military uniform helped a man to rape her. "They took our clothes." That is their way of saying rape. I ask, "Do you have a husband?" "Yes and two more children." But he fled to Chad and she has not seen him for a while. They were crossing the border but her husband is not the father of the other two kids (the first died). So when many guns started, he asked her to run and leave the kids and she refused. "Thanks to God we did not get shot but then this happened (motions to her belly)." She has not heard from her husband in over a year.

She feels someone needs to come here who can protect her from the Janjaweed.

I ask if others from the village have been raped recently. "Twelve, but only I am pregnant." Among tribes rape can be considered a shame to the village. She says her husband sent word only through a male friend here that "she did something bad by the rape."

"I will take care, of course, of the baby but I have no clothes or food for the other kids already, so..." She is 25 years old.

---

A discussion:

If NFIs (non-food items) were brought in. It must be done carefully. Fix the well. Some pots or jerry cans. But a small wood burning stove, new plastic sheeting, a grinding machine would attract the enemy. It might threaten the security of the people.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

I sit down with the kids. Their clothes have so many holes. They are falling off. They have no shoes. I ask the translator to please say, "You have been through a lot. You have been very strong." Some smile. Others bow their heads. They want me to know they miss school. "What do they need?" "First food and then water." "Do they have any medicine?" "No." I notice many cuts. A young girl's eye is closed and puffy like a golf ball. Maybe an insect. No doctor is here to look at it.

"Before the fighting, what was your life like?" School, lots of fruit. Some don't know where their parents are. They ran and hope they are alive "in Chad or the East." "Some of us are orphans staying with other families."

They tell me how they have been beaten. Abda was tied by his neck and beaten and then left for dead. His father was killed by the Janjaweed. He is 10 years old.

They are worried that in the coming days it will get cold. I would ask what I normally ask. What do you want to be when you grow up? Or what is your favorite sport or food, etc. But to ask these children would be cruel. They have no childhood and no hope.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

They shake hands and touch hearts. I do the same.

---

I promise I will find a way to do what I can to help, but even as I say it I feel helpless.

---

I ask in the car about medical. What if a child has an emergency? "INTERSOS or UNHCR would drive them to a Red Cross or MSF center, no matter how far. That is the only option right now."

We drive towards Habila and stop at the destroyed villages. Adam walks with me. The hot dirt burns in my sandals. This was a huge village. How long does it take to do this damage? "One day."

There was a school and clinic. This village, this town, these people almost erased. There were maybe over 1,000 people. It's so dead here. So broken. Only locusts. It's hard to imagine life here. It is estimated that here are a hundred villages like this. This is what happened, what's still happening.



UNHCR/ R. Ek

The pots are left behind smashed and covered in dirt. I see a little shoe in the ground. I wonder if it fell off when a little boy was running. Walk into a burned down hut. Clear glass catches my eye. I uncover it. It is an oil lamp. Next to it is a woman's bracelet. It is a charred piece of metal. I ask if I can take it. I want to remember. "Of course," he glances around, "who would mind? If you see any cows," (I don't) "but if you go up the road, you see they belong to nomads."

Adam from UNHCR tells me his village was also destroyed. It was near El Geneina. "Completely damaged in less than week." He was a school teacher. I would hope UNHCR would help him organize the children, if only to lecture the children under the trees on a chalkboard. The other UNHCR staff says that UNICEF is helping in some areas and they hope to ask them to come here.

We drive by a pack of camels. They are Janjaweed camels. A man with a gun walks with them. Their animals look strong and healthy. Not all animals in Darfur are Janjaweed. Of course most are. I ask how you tell the Janjaweed from the local Arabs. "A common misconception is to refer to them as Arab vs. African. They appear the same." To me they all look African.

We drive to stop at the clinic in Habila, set up next to the children's schools. MSF Switzerland and Save the Children USA. Also a sign says: USAID is present. MSF walks us around. Between 70 and 120 per day are treated. 23% are suffering from hepatitis – a water-borne disease. Much dysentery and malaria.

---

They have been here four months. Organized outpatient, pharmacy and maternity ward. If a patient needs to be sent to a local hospital, MSF covers the

bills. Feeding center for malnourished children with a rotation. On average there are 60 children. Some are discharged when they're strong enough, only to return.

Two times a month MSF does a blanket feeding for all of Habila for children under five years. They reach 2,700 children.

---

Here in MSF:

4 international staff

62 national staff

2 doctors (1 expat, 1 Sudanese)

In Darfur north, south, east and west:

MSF France

MSF Belgium

MSF Switzerland

MSF Holland

MSF Spain

In some areas emergency needs seem less, so they are able to focus on the community.

A gynecologist is coming to help, to start to work and talk with the women. As of right now, it is difficult to get the women to discuss rape.

UNICEF is building another school for IDPs. They have already built three. The population grew from 7,000 to 20,000 in one year.

INTERSOS has us at their guest house for lunch. Very basic. Local women cook food. I eat and am very grateful for it. I notice they have some pasta. We laugh, even in Sudan – “Italian.” They are a wonderful group of people. They started in Chad and came into Darfur months ago.

We walk to another office. Here you can walk. Still you are not allowed to walk alone. It is more stable here, but people are still afraid. Women in Habila (IDPs) were raped and told the government. The response to the women was: “I hope you will leave the village before the latrine is full.”

We pass children. “Hawadi, Hawadi.” one of the UNHCR staff tells me, “At first I thought they were saying ‘How are you?’, but no. It is ‘white person.’” Little kids, I would guess six or seven, walk with jugs of water on their heads. Children work so hard here. All children, not just the displaced. But for displaced and for refugees it is that much harder.

We have a meeting with the community leader. Is he good or bad? I don't know, but he has control. He is the king of this area. Marcos from UNHCR expresses

how glad they were to see Magarsa. How important it is to access the situation. The leader gets tense and asks if I am here to look at security. I explain – purely humanitarian. I am not here to judge.

He tells us how to return people. To coordinate and build homes and fix water so they can return. He says, “People really want to get home but the government alone cannot take care.” I’m afraid to ask if he thinks it is safe. It seems he will say yes. And all the people I met are terrified to go home. In my opinion today’s homes would be built only to be burnt down and pillaged again. So if the government won’t take responsibility and cannot ensure safety, should the aid agencies invest further in building?

---

I stop writing for a while. He looks at my book and I am suddenly afraid he can read English. He is speaking English. Mimi explains carefully that UNHCR wants to see returns happen also. But it must be the right time and properly prepared.

He talks of placing more policemen in the area. (I wonder who they are, these “policemen”). “We are looking for cars. New cars.” He suggests put up electricity stations to bring TVs to help. “People have too much leisure time.” Is he saying put TVs where the burnt down houses are to help inspire people to return? Someone from INTERSOS says, “What about light?” “Yes. Light would also be good.”

He says there are 39,000 people here recently returned from Chad. From the stolen glances in the room that seems not correct information. “All these thousands of people are coming from Chad?” “Yes.” He explains how stable the areas are and how people are getting on with their lives. He makes no mention of crops being destroyed and the inability to farm this year. He never mentions the Janjaweed. As if they don’t exist. He says people with relatives in Chad are asking is it safe. They want to come home. I don’t doubt that the government says yes. UN, NGO and others say no.

He asks for my impressions of Magarsa. I said the people have many needs – clothes, schools. I say they are not feeling safe. He appears to get upset. “What they complain? Why? What?” I feel I may be getting them in trouble. I backtrack. No they did not complain, just maybe it could be better. “Good. We plan to send back people.”

He says the government wants to help rebuild. To help the government rebuild he wants \$4 million. We are looking for sharing of this plan. He smiles. On our way out we pass his car. It’s brand new with fresh flowers on the dash.

Pass old men waiting to pray. They sit on USAID plastic tarp. The irony.

We enter the IDP camp. It blends into the village. A little boy alone sits in dirt. He smiles as we walk up to him and pass him. He smiles, more full of love and joy than any child I have ever seen. How can that be? How is he smiling? Sitting in the dirt, burnt out of his home and forced to flee. Guns fired at him, family members killed. I walk past him and look back. He sees me and smiles again.

---

A little boy walks up. Maybe 10 years old. He holds a few notebook pages stapled together and under one arm he carries a tire and stick. He is not going to school but he studies his old school papers, preparing. We wish him that it comes soon.

A pack of children gather behind us. The boy with the school book says, "A, B, C. One, two, three. Okay okay A, B, C, F." I would give anything for a bag full of pens and paper for them. I make a promise to myself to always carry this. I have one pen I give it to the school boy. I point to his paper, he points to mine. I show him my pen he holds up his new one. We walk by INTERSOS. Workers holding UNICEF tarp covering. A newly built latrine – a hole dug 3 meters deep and a slab for a toilet. One of the children shows a toy car he made. He even found a way for it to make a sound.



UNHCR/ M.-N. Little

We pass a funeral. Men are sitting and praying around the dead man. As we walk back to the office at least 10 kids walk with us. They run and jump and play. You can't help but fall in love with every one of them.

A boy walks up to get my attention. "How are you?" he says clearly. I say, "Good, how are you?" He says, "Very well, my son." (Clearly what is said to him.) The other kids giggle because he is speaking in a strange tongue. As I look down at them I notice in the sand many little bare footprints.

We run into another group of kids. They want to shake our hands. Some girls shake, then run away giggling. It seems like a game. 'Who's crazy enough to go and meet the strange white ladies?' It is a reminder of how new internationals still are to this area.

Back at INTERSOS guest quarters Jean-Bernard is trying to edit the footage of the last few days to release to news agencies. Everyone keeps stepping on the wires and it keeps cutting out. Looking around it seems crazy what he is trying to do.

A generator. Small water pump. Brick and cement building with a straw roof. Pebbles, rocks, in fact, are on much of the floor. Mosquito nets or old USAID tarps are used for curtains. There are chairs and benches to work on and in fact I enjoy it here but I am only passing through. To live and work here for months on end dealing on a daily basis with the stress and surrounded by a people so in need and without proper security and access to some areas. The ability to help and find solutions is not easy. I admire aid workers so much. They are a special breed of people.

Layla from INTERSOS explains that Habila may seem calm but just last week four women were killed. Rape of thousands of women is worse than just affecting the women, worse than the actual horror of rape. Here it seems almost planned to systematically undermine the community and culture and break relations between all people and tribes. In these cultures a rape is a shame on the family and community. But also many young girls are raped. The fathers are distraught because they could not protect them. Wives are raped and become pregnant and it is breaking the family apart. If it becomes safe (other than rebuilding their homes and starting over with their crops) they will have to address what has happened. The rape, the murder. Will they suppress anger and be able to help the women?

---

The discussion turns. The oil the people are complaining about. I ask? It's different but WFP is running out of food.

Marie-Noelle and I brought out protein bars, extra mosquito nets and canned food. Only a few items. We thought they would be what we were eating, but we hand them over. It's crazy, everybody gets excited about a small can of corn. Everyone shares a protein bar.

I lay down to sleep, all night donkeys and dogs.

**October 27, 2004**

The future of Africa solving African problems is ideal. EU must observe assist or train as necessary.

---

Fly to El Geneina

Bernard, Irish army officer to observe. Meet the Irish EU advisor for the AU. He has been here 3 months (EU and US are supporters). African response to an African problem.

The strength of AU (African Union) initiative is that it is coming from Africa. Just yesterday down in the south there was a newly burnt down village. From what I understand a team consisting of representatives from the EU, US, AU, SLA (Sudanese Liberation Army), the Sudanese government and Janjaweed visited this location. They are including everyone to ensure peace holds. Joint monitoring will increase substantially over the next few months. The main challenge is logistics. Transport. "It is working because it has to work. The only other possibility is chaos. This is the first attempt under the new AU structure. So far so good. Need to build on that."

On the plane back to Khartoum. I speak with Elene, head of WFP. She explains they are doing well but need constant support. Needs to be more support for NGOs and UN. Aid workers are stretched thin. They work too many hours. Their own medical health. Everyone is trying to do the best with what they have got.

---

Government would like WFP to deliver food to areas that they want people to return but WFP can't put people in harm's way. Many areas are unsecured and other humanitarian agencies say it is not safe.

Need many people on the ground to see who is getting food and how much. What is being stolen? Solid infrastructure and security need to be in place for proper food delivery. "Wonderful if we didn't have to use the planes – they're expensive."

Need for returns:

- 1 security
  - 2 their ability to sustain themselves.
- 

"OCHA has been great at helping coordinate everyone, to avoid overlapping and help everyone communicate."

---

Area I walked luckily no fighting on that day. But four days before maybe. No area is 100% secure. Some are worse than others.

This situation is far from over. Bottom line. Without security this situation will not move forward. This is a complicated political situation.

I have read the Human Rights Watch reports and from what I've seen I believe the allegations to be correct (we should all pay close attention to the HRW reports).

When I was meeting with people in different areas, the Janjaweed would walk by, making their presence known. Anyone who speaks to internationals could be threatened.

---

UNHCR simply must have access to the places of origin. If they don't, safe returns are impossible.

---

Right before the press conference I am told by a local man, "Almost all press is controlled by the government. Still some are really trying to get the full story out."

Janjaweed. They will tell you they have always been around but they had sticks. After June 2003 they had AK47s. How did they get them?

UNHCR is not able to be present in areas of need due to security restrictions. Presence is protection.

Getting back in the vehicles I hear in Iraq they have removed all UN signs, used to be untouchable but not now. Now maybe targets.

---

Since my visit (update as of January 24, 2005):

Security continues to deteriorate in Darfur, where an estimated 1.6 million people are currently displaced and more than 200,000 have fled across the border to neighboring Chad. UNHCR's roving teams in West Darfur continue to hear of security incidents against displaced people and local populations, as well as of fresh displacement. The security situation on the ground still hampers the humanitarian aid effort as some areas remain "no go" zones for UN agencies. Non-governmental agencies have had to suspend operations or totally withdraw from certain regions due to clashes and the mounting danger to staff. Despite these constraints, UNHCR teams continue to visit villages in West Darfur, particularly along the border with Chad, to monitor the situation for displaced people and contribute to security and protection through an international presence.

*Presented here are the unedited thoughts and impressions of Ms. Jolie during and immediately following her trip. They are entirely her ideas, and do not represent the official position of UNHCR. The text and the images accompanying it may not be reproduced without Ms. Jolie's permission.*

---