

## Angelina Jolie's Thailand Journal

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On the plane trip from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son I was handed *The Nation*, which is Bangkok's independent newspaper. Front and centre in bold letters it read: "**KHIN NYUNT OUSTED.**" Drama in Yangon. I thought for a moment that might mean good news. Admittedly I did not know who Khin Nyunt was but only that he belonged to the government. The same government that has held Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest for 19 months. It wasn't good news. He was apparently one of the last men internationals have been able to have a dialog with about democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi. Maybe that's why they wanted him out.

The country consists of 135 ethnic groups, with more than 40% of the population belonging to ethnic minorities, living mainly on the periphery near the border with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. Burma became independent in 1948 and almost immediately began to disintegrate. In 1962, an army general led a coup against the elected government and since then, the country has been under a reclusive military regime.

I learned while in Thailand that in 1989, Burma was renamed the Union of Myanmar. In 1990, following huge pro-democracy demonstrations, elections were organized. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won an overwhelming majority but the junta prevented the elected members from taking office. Its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who received the 1991 Nobel Peace prize, has been most of the time under house arrest or detention since 1989.

I am traveling with Marie-Noelle Little and Zalmi from UNHCR. Zalmi is a photographer from Switzerland. UNHCR helps him to promote his exhibits around the world together with corporate sponsors. He is an extraordinary photographer. We met in Washington, D.C. for World Refugee Day. His exhibit of photographs from Afghanistan was up in the halls of National Geographic. He walked me through it. It was then I realized he himself was a refugee from Afghanistan.

For over a quarter of century, Afghanistan has been devastated by war, drought and famine. Her people have been displaced, and her culture eviscerated. After 22 years in exile, Zalmi returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and has spent months photographing his homeland.



UNHCR/ H. Farhad/ 06.2004

Also, he had just come from Afghanistan where he was covering the election.



Zalmai



Zalmai

Zalmai said, "It was a big moment while I was in Afghanistan to see people queuing for the distribution of relief items after 23 years of war. But, it was even more moving to witness 8 million people going to vote on 9 Oct. despite the threats from the Taliban and all. It was definitely a sign that the people of Afghanistan wanted a real change. Also, many Afghan women voted for the first time in their life. An elderly lady I met in Kabul said 'This is the first time I am asked my opinion about the future of my country. It is too late for my generation, but I vote so that for my children will have a bright future.'"

When we met in Washington we spoke about all the many parts of the world where people are being oppressed and where human rights are being violated. Naturally our thoughts went to Burma or Myanmar, as it is now called. Knowing it would be next to impossible to get inside Myanmar due to diplomatic complications, we thought it best to meet the people, the families who have been forced to flee and ask them why.

It's late at night now. I have been reading through my briefing notes, preparing for my visit tomorrow to the camp. My son is passed out from a long day in the sun. And as I write this it sounds like two small animals are having a fight on my roof.

I read about the orphans I will meet and wonder how I'll feel. Of course I will feel sad but I expect they will haunt me more than most because they are a similar nationality to my son and he too was an orphan.

**October 21, 2004**

Ban Tractor/ Ban Pang Kwai Camp

Location

- Province: Mae Hong Son
- Distance from Myanmar border: approx. 3km

Background

The camp was opened in 1996. There has been substantial number of new arrivals due to ongoing fighting on the other side of the border. The camp population is 17,212 registered residents (plus some 1,500 unregistered). The majority of the population is Kayah, from Shadau township of Kayah state, and they are mostly farmers.

NGOs

- Burmese Border Consortium (BBC): food supplies (rice, chili, salt, yellow bean and cooking oil), housing materials (wood and bamboo) and household items (9 cooking pots, plates and spoons)
- Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR): social services and capacity building for extremely vulnerable individuals, separated children (funded by UNHCR)
- Handicap International (HI): Handicap workshop, prosthesis program and community-based rehabilitation program (funded by UNHCR)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC): water and sanitation, health and capacity building program
- Jesuit Refugees Service (JRS): teacher skill training, teacher materials and incentives for refugee teachers
- Women's Education for Advancement and Employment (WEAVE): nursery schools, nursery teaching training, teachers incentives and women's advancement and employment
- ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands (ZOA): note books, stationary and sports materials

FOOD

Food is provided by BBC with the following monthly rations:

- Rice 16kg/adult 8 kg/child(<5)
- Chili 1000g/person
- Salt 330g/person regardless of age
- Yellow bean 1.5 kg/adult 750 gm/child(<5)
- Cooking oil 1 litre/adult 500ml/child(<5)

Zalmi and I meet Sawyu, our interpreter. He was a Karen refugee himself. He now has a permanent job with UNHCR.

As we drive, out the window as far as the eye can see it is lush green -- so green it is almost neon in the bright sunlight.

We drive through -- literally *through* rivers -- on the way to the camp. On the side of the road at a check point we meet the camp commander from the Ministry of Interior. He will lead us in.

Sawyu asks Zalmi how he feels in Thailand compared to Afghanistan. "It's so green. They are both Asia but they seem like different planets." Sawyu wishes Zalmi stability in his country.

We drive into the camp. A vast bamboo city (since 1993). Right away you can see a difference on the faces. There is sadness, heaviness in the air. The children are beautiful and shy. Many of them born here. Stateless. I meet a woman washing clothes.

"What made you leave?"

"The Burmese military forced us to leave."

"How?"

"By force. They threatened to kill. Then they burned our home."

"What are your hopes for the future?"

She laughs. "Don't know."

"Are all your family here?"

"Some are here. Some still in the jungles in Burma."

She was a farmer in Myanmar. Here farming is not allowed. A camp is on borrowed land. Only so much can be done to the soil.

Next I meet another refugee woman. She left in 1990. Domestic violence. As she speaks I notice yellow dust on her face. I wonder if it is for religious or beauty purposes. She has three children. Ages three, six and eight. A similar story. The Myanmar military came to the house, robbed the family and then took her into the jungle.

"Was she with them for a long time?"

"Yes."

Then she speaks passionately in her own tongue for some time.

"What was it like?" I ask.

If she doesn't want to talk about it is alright.

"The men wore masked faces..." She doesn't want to continue.

We sit in silence for a moment, then I ask.

"How does she feel about Aung San Suu Kyi?"

"I only heard name, never saw a picture."

"What did she hear?"

“Only from a neighbor that her father was killed and that she wanted to replace her father but the government would not let her.”  
She does not know much of democracy.

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I ask reluctantly about her husband. She has been sewing the whole time. At the mention of him she stops.

“First of all,” I say, “I am sorry. I heard he was not good to you.”  
“He beat me many times. I run away and cry. I ask him to be arrested but he wasn’t. Then I beat him with a stick. He died.”  
That was one year and 5 months ago.  
“Then I was sent to prison for 16 months.”

“Where were your children?”  
“With an elderly lady in Camp 2.”  
“Have you had any counseling?”  
“No. No one.”  
“What are your fears?”  
“For my children, money for when they get sick. But even when they want a sweet food, a little treat I can’t give them any. Also, I think often of my husband.”

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Since 1948 when the British left, since Independence, it has been very hostile. “One people want to rule over others.” I wonder if it’s like in Sri Lanka or other former colonial countries. It seems, whoever is friend to the occupiers become the oppressed when they leave.

We step up on a hill and suddenly I am overwhelmed with a view of the camp from above. It’s beautiful and sad, I am overwhelmed by a mix of emotions. It is a city full of special people. Survivors. Remarkable families. It is also a prison.

Someone whispers, “The pole standing in the middle of town is for Spirit Worship. They are Animist. They sacrifice chickens. They use the whole chicken. They even use the bones to tell the future.”

“The animist religion is a religion that believes in the spirit or guardian of the land, the mountain, river, forest, etc. that one must please in order to live safely, peacefully, prosperously in and on it. Displeasing or defiling these spirits (which can happen when one commits adultery, fornication or causes disrespect by cursing or urinating at a certain place or area) will lead to sickness, disability, extraordinary death or a curse in the form of inadequate yield of crops or destruction of crops by insects, animals or natural disaster. To atone for inappropriate conduct, individuals or the community has to sacrifice chicken, pig or cattle to the displeased spirits. Animists have a spirit master in their community which communicates with the spirits.”

It's strange. It seems in many ways they have every reason not to have faith and yet their faith is stronger in them than in most.

Religious groups:

- Animist: 51%
- Catholic: some 33%
- Baptists: 9%
- Buddhists: 7%

We stop along the road and speak with elderly men about their hope for the future. I ask if they know about the recent change in Government. They don't. We tell them. It's not good news, but still they don't completely understand the repercussions. Their future lies in the hands of these men, but most of the people are simple farmers.

I move to sit by an old lady. Her mouth is red. She spits orange. It looks like fresh blood. She tells me chewing beetle nut helps the pain in her mouth. She has been here nine years already.

"What finally made you cross the border?"

"Military gave problems."

"You miss it very much. Are you desperate to go back even though there is fighting?" I ask.

"We know we can't now, but we dream."

I visit children's classes. The roofs are made from dry leaves stacked together and the walls are made with bamboo and strips of tree branch. Inside the children are focused and studying very hard.



Zalmai

You wonder, knowing the realities in their country, if they will ever have a chance for a free safe future in Myanmar. Stability in the country will only be possible if this generation is focused and educated. If there is a chance to return and rebuild they will be ready.

Down the path we hear singing and follow it. We find one of the teachers playing an old guitar and teaching the kids a new song. It's more than just a song. It is a way of keeping a language and culture alive when living in another country. We spent a while there. It was wonderful. A moment of smiles and peace. They laughed at me because I didn't know if I should clap or stomp.

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Next we visit a place called an accelerated school. It's a school for young people who missed many years of education due to conflict. For example, a child soldier. They try to speed through curriculum to catch up.

I meet a child soldier. I put my notebook down out of courtesy to his privacy. He sees it and motions that it's alright. I promise not to write his name. He explains he was kidnapped at 14 on his way home. He was put in the back of a truck and shackled in leg cuffs. One boy spoke up and was beaten with a gun. "We were forced through 4 or 5 months training. They say 'You will lie. You will say you are 18. You are not a child. You are a soldier now.' Can't contact parents, even now they might be targeted because we escaped." "Any chance to see them?" He looks at the floor. Very softly, "No."

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We visit a project that started last April. It's a special needs program – 201 children and young adults. 16 teachers. It looks like a poor kindergarten. Alphabet posters and the like hang on the bamboo walls.

"The community does not yet see the value or possibility of teaching disabled. They do not feel yet these children can be useful." To help. For example one child has a bad ear. I ask about an operation. They laugh and say no one is here to do it. It is not life and death and when asked the boy said, "I never heard of a doctor giving new ears. Are they from dead people?" They tell me at least twenty children need glasses. IRC has given glasses to the elderly. Teachers are hoping the children will be next. These teachers say they are very encouraged by these children. "They study very hard." Still they are concerned their funds will run out. JRS is the only sponsor and it is only for two years. Some cases of blindness and deafness come not at birth but later. The teachers believe more hygiene awareness could help. These teachers teach what they know but they feel they need to learn more and, if taught, they will work hard to spread information.

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We eat in the truck and talk of the politics causing this situation. “What is happening inside Myanmar? Can we know?” “No. If you are allowed in it’s only to see select places and you are not left alone.” Zalmi says he went for a month and was unable to travel freely. There are U.S. sanctions but they (the government) don’t care. It doesn’t affect them.

Can’t be military force like Iraq. Clearly that is not the answer. Once again I find myself asking about an International Criminal Court. The main obstacle in its way seems to be the U.S. Government. Someone whispers maybe that is because they would be put on trial. The International Criminal Court (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. The more I hear about it, the more I support it.

We drive through the camp to the refugee family we will stay with. We drive for a long while. 18,500 people all here. 20 schools (13 primary schools, 5 middle schools, 1 high school, 1 post-ten school). 4,952 students.

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We get out and walk around. They are such a beautiful and gracious people. It makes me imagine how Myanmar could be. The sun is going down and women are bathing their children outside. Peaceful.

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At house #137 Section 17 we meet the man we will be staying with tonight. He is Mr. David Saw Wah. He is 58 years old. He is a very distinguished man and he is a refugee. He speaks English and German. Studied engineering in Germany for 7 years. He was a technical advisor at the Karenni Development Department. His home is covered with newspaper headlines and awareness posters -- Malaria and landmines awareness. He has started an agricultural garden, because he says, “Deforestation is serious in every part of the world.”

“I am trying to give an example of a small backyard with the correct plants and trees that will be green and supply food, fertilizer and firewood.” The garden is very impressive. He is also concerned that farming methods and skills are being lost because of war and displacement.

“If we all – God willing – get back to Burma with everything that has been burned down and all farmers pushed out, there will be a lot to fix, replant and bring back to life. The young generation needs to learn the skills and the old are forgetting.”

Zalmi comments, “Even modern countries don’t spend nearly enough time and effort to think of these things. The thing in this is in the man’s backyard.”

I wonder, is it possible that when material life is stripped away from you your mind has the capacity to be clearer?

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David explains, proudly he has been able to get Lucinda. *Lucinda is a kind of tree that serves for nitrogen fixing, holding soil and nutrient from getting lost when rain washes on a slope land. Its leaf is good for enriching the soil. The young leaf and fruit are edible as vegetables.*

I ask David “How did you learn all this?” “The elders. Some cannot read or write but they know the land. I read a lot of books and with my knowledge of mechanical engineering I figure some things out.”

As he walks around I think of how different the world would be if men like him could rule. He keeps telling sweet stories and smiling. His attitude is that what he is doing is not special. He enjoys his work and feels grateful for the opportunity. “We are trying to produce earth worms. They are very good for soil.” He looks at me with a smile. “In America, you can even buy them.”

He explains you can put compost in a sack and raise it up in a tree. “We call it Gorilla gardening. Animals don’t reach and for those people hiding in the jungle inside Burma they can farm in sacks, then put them up in the trees so our enemies don’t see.”

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David works together with BBC, the NGO. In 2 years he has trained over 2,000 families to make the small garden. “They are brought here from other camps. We cannot be dependent on aid. Our children need to understand they can make food, not wait to be given.”

David also shows us some guinea pigs. They are good protein and they breed quickly. The camp commander tells us he did question how sane everyone was when the BBC leader said, “David wants to bring a hamster into the camp.” Now I understand he says. I wonder if that’s dinner.

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Dinner by candlelight.

By candlelight two boys speak to Zalmai and me. They tell us of a difficult conversation they had with the teachers at the AMP school. “We suggest grammar and writing. They say, ‘You are student. We are management.’ ” Not many teachers, and they are not well-trained. Arguably they are doing the best they can but it is in need of improvement. I agree. After all this is the future of a country and if well-educated it will balance then. “We want to know if you could help us find a better teacher.” Amazing. I ask if they want me to send anything – CDs, magazines...They say no. Just books — “Engineering, language and management, please.”

I overhear one boy talking to Zalmi. He finds out he was a refugee also. They shake hands. "You understand." "Yes." Zalmi tells of how many people died and about how long they were refugees. The boy expresses sympathy for him.

I watch these two men, bonded by the most difficult human experience – loss of loved ones, loss of country, loss of human rights and dignity. The long struggle back. And in the case of Myanmar, it might one day be possible, but now a journey home looks dim.

### **October 22, 2004**

I have no idea what time it is. About a half hour ago roosters started crowing. I swear one was inches from my head on the other side of the bamboo wall. Ten minutes later. Slowly I could hear whispers and movement and then as the orchestra of roosters expanded around the camp I could officially feel the morning begin. I'm going to get my shoes on and go outside to find Zalmi.

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First I find David sitting with him over coffee. He says to me, "If every individual took care over a small garden they could sustain themselves. Energy, wood, some food."

It reminds me of the Okinawa Program. It is a regimen based on Okinawa islanders' healthy way of eating and living. Okinawa people in Japan have the longest life expectancy in the world.

"Your president, Abraham Lincoln, studied law by candlelight."

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We speak about possible ways to create energy – sun, wind, magnets, tide. "You can ferment sugarcane (possibly corn) to alcohol then to energy – ethanol. He says, "Maybe if the American people could ask Mr. Bush to focus on better use of energy?" If the realities of that weren't so depressing, I'm sure that would have made me laugh.

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Zalmi and I go for a walk.

Then over breakfast David asks me about Native Americans. He tells us about how he read how wonderful they are with nature. He has read and learned much from them. "They could do much good for your country." He's right. But I explain they live in areas not dissimilar to refugee camps. Broken treaty laws. For many the only real option is casinos. "They are so valuable – such a shame. We heard they are also very brave." I smile. That's true.

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We thank David's family for their hospitality and set out for another day in the camp.

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First we travel to the stove making center. This is a project David started after reading about them in a book. "Use half the firewood. Save half the forest." Mix clay and cement. It will harden in one week. Old tin oil container to wrap around pottery. David practiced making them himself until he figured out how. Now he shows the others.

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IRC (International Rescue Committee)

Malaria. Diarrhea.

Many breast feeding babies hung by slings on their mothers' chests. The echo of crying children, sweating smiling mothers. I meet Ms. Dena. She is the local medic. "Mostly our problem is severe pneumonia in children here."

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I meet a man bitten by a centipede. He explains there was pain and numbness up the arm and then difficulty breathing.

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Babies with pneumonia. Loving mothers in bed with them, stroking their backs. A few old men with pneumonia sitting stoically looking out of the open windows. No one complains. Open loving faces. These people have a quiet dignity. Even in the hospital the spirit of the people and the colors of the dress (happy pretty colors) make the environment peaceful.

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Basket weaving.

Back at the school a young man sits with me (he wears cool silver ring, camouflage pants – a good-looking young man). He tells me that when he was in Myanmar he stepped on a landmine when fleeing from the soldiers. His artificial leg is new. He wants to go inside to show us. He is embarrassed. "It's still fresh." He asks am I sure I want to see it. I am. He explains how he ran on for 3 minutes after it exploded and it took his foot and ankle. But then he passed out. He is 17 years old. "Is your family here?" "No. Burma." "Do you have any contact with them?" "No."



*Zalmai*

My son meets me in the camp. Marie-Noelle is walking with him up the road. After so many stories of separated families I am so grateful to have him in my arms.

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## ORPHANAGE

We visit the Orphanage. The children want to sing for us.

They know 40 songs -- Karen and English. A lot of songs about Jesus. My mother is Catholic and lovely, so I see the beauty of that religion. But when it seems without choice – a new culture in exchange for aid. It does not seem fair. Obviously missionaries have done many good things but all the children should have the freedom to make up their own minds. More importantly, having lost their country they should know their ancestors' beliefs.

I meet each one of them and they say: My name is ---. I am in ----- grade. I want to be a ----. My favorite color is -----.

It is explained to me that because of many Italian missionaries in Myanmar, many of the refugees are Christian and have Italian names.

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The children watch us leave. I wonder what they are thinking looking at Mad in the car. He looks like their brother. They're orphans, but do they know adoption? I look at them watch us.

Two siblings. Their parents died from HIV. A child whose father was recently killed by a landmine. I look at their faces and wonder about their future. Every month over 2,000 people are killed or maimed by mine explosions. Most of the casualties are civilians who are killed or injured after hostilities have ended. *(For more information, visit <http://www.mineaction.org>).*

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The following extracts are taken from "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Thai Policy towards Burmese Refugees and Migrants" (Human Rights Watch 2004):

"To Donor Governments

- Insist that the Thai Government immediately authorize UNHCR to conduct Refugee Status Determination activities for Burmese with new or pending asylum claims in Thailand, in accordance with UNHCR's mandate.
- Support UNHCR's effort to resettle Burmese asylum seekers in accordance with the criteria set out in UNHCR's Resettlement Handbook.
- Press the Thai Government to abandon its current policy that only those fleeing armed conflict are entitled to protection and temporary stay in Thailand.
- Fund protection and assistance programs in the Burmese border camps and for urban Refugees in Bangkok and other urban centers.
- Increase support for UNHCR and NGOs to provide protection, housing and food, education and medical assistance to asylum seekers and refugees living in urban areas. In particular, increase funding to UNHCR so that it can enhance its protection capacity in the refugee camps and at the border and increase the number of protection officers based not only at the Bangkok Immigration Detention center but also at immigration detention centers and holding camps on the Thai-Burma border.
- Actively intervene with the Thai Government in support of UNHCR in its protection role in Thailand and make more frequent visits to the border to directly assess conditions there.

To Burmese Authorities

- End the abuses that have forced Burmese to flee to Thailand and seek asylum by establishing the rule of law and respect for human rights for all people of Burma.
- Release all political prisoners, including members of opposition National League for Democracy, who have been sentenced to long prison terms for the peaceful expression of their views, and end the widespread torture and ill-treatment of detainees. Re-engage in dialogue with Aung-San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy.

- Cease the widespread use of forced labor by the military, where villages are compelled to work without pay on infrastructure and agricultural projects, as porters in army camps, and on construction of temples.
- Cease the conscription of children under the age of eighteen for the armed forces.
- Cease the forcible relocation of minority villages in areas where ethnic minority activities and rebels are active, and in areas targeted for economic development and tourism. End abuse by Burmese Government troops in which villages, hospitals and schools in ethnic areas are burned or otherwise destroyed. Villagers are conscripted to perform forced labor, and suspected opponents of regime executed.
- End the systematic rape of women and girls in Shan State and other regions by the Burmese military.
- Lift restrictions on free expression, assembly and association in order to allow space for legitimate peaceful political activities.”

Maybe this is one answer.

*(For information on statistics about humanitarian issues and UNHCR, [click here](#))*

*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.*

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