No Place to Call Home

**BANGKOK, Thailand** (Achieve3000, February 25, 2009). A group of refugees recently fled the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar (also known as Burma) in rickety boats. They journeyed across a treacherous ocean and headed toward the shores of the neighboring nation of Thailand. However, they were intercepted by the Thai Navy, towed back out to sea, and cast adrift once again. Although officials from India later rescued some of the abandoned refugees, hundreds of others are believed to have perished. Now, Angelina Jolie, award-winning actress and goodwill ambassador for the United Nations (UN), has called on Thailand's government to respect the human rights of this ethnic minority—called the Rohingya people—and allow new waves of them to remain in the country.

The Rohingya people represent just a portion of Myanmar's refugee exodus. The refugees face persecution from the country's military junta, which has been accused of gross atrocities against its own people. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities have been forced to flee to neighboring countries, including Thailand. Thai refugee camps now house 140,000 refugees. Some of them have lived there for more than 20 years, with little hope of being relocated and granted citizenship elsewhere. Thai officials recognize most people at these camps as refugees with a legitimate reason to fear returning to their homelands.

However, Thailand does not grant refugee status to the Muslim Rohingyas. Thailand sends most of these refugees away.

Angelina Jolie, who volunteers with the UN's Refugee Agency, recently traveled to Thailand to tour one of the country's refugee camps, called Ban Mai Nai Soi, located just two miles from the Myanmar border. During her visit, Jolie spoke to several refugees, including a 26-year-old woman named Pan Sein, who had escaped from Myanmar last year. Jolie inquired as to whether the young woman was afraid as she made her perilous journey to Thailand. "Yes, I was scared," Pan Sein replied. "It was dangerous to flee, but even more dangerous to stay in my village."

Jolie also met orphans at a boarding school and attempted to comfort teenage girls who feared they might be sent back to Myanmar. "I hope we can work with the Thai authorities to speed up the government admissions process," Jolie told them. She also told them that she hoped they would not be forced to return to Myanmar while the danger there remains.

Jolie said that she was saddened to meet people who were born in Ban Mai Nai Soi and had been detained in the camp so long that they were now raising their own children there. Despite this, she said that it also heartened her to see refugees being protected from the dreadful treatment they would undoubtedly suffer in their own homelands. She urged Thai officials to offer the same shelter to the Rohingya people.

"Visiting Ban Mai Nai Soi and seeing how hospitable Thailand has been to [other] refugees over the years makes me hope that Thailand will be just as generous to the Rohingya refugees who are now arriving on their shores," Jolie said.

The actress asked Thai authorities to respect the rights of the Rohingya refugees. She noted that it is unlikely that they will be allowed back to Myanmar anytime soon. The actress also pleaded with the Thai government for greater freedom for the tens of thousands of Burmese refugees who are currently confined to the camps.

Jolie's visit followed not long after the incident involving the Rohingya "boat people" was making news around the world. According to UN spokesperson Kitt McKinsey, the timing of the actress's visit was a mere coincidence. Still, it did not sit well with Thai authorities. They responded by censuring the UN for permitting Jolie to visit the refugee camp.

Jolie's mission has taken her to more than 20 countries to comfort refugees. This was the 33-year-old actress's third such trip to Thailand.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*

**Dictionary**

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| **atrocity** *(noun)*    an evil or cruel act |
| **censure** *(verb)*    to criticize harshly |
| **exodus** *(noun)*    a mass departure; the leaving of a place by great numbers of people |
| **junta** *(noun)*    a military group that rules a country as a result of a takeover |
| **status** *(noun)*    one's legal standing or position |