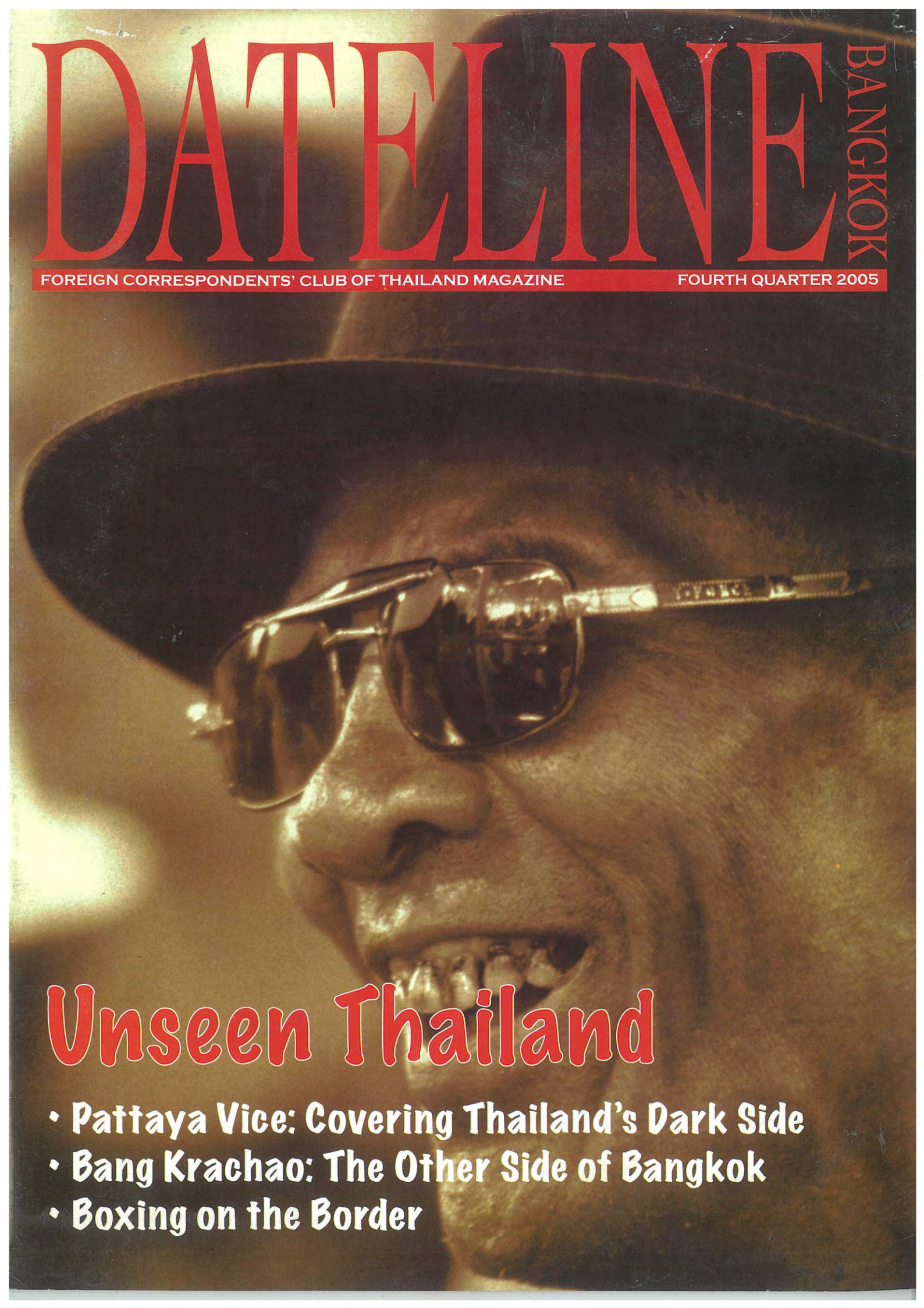


DATELINE



BANGKOK

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB OF THAILAND MAGAZINE

FOURTH QUARTER 2005

Unseen Thailand

- Pattaya Vice: Covering Thailand's Dark Side
- Bang Krachao: The Other Side of Bangkok
- Boxing on the Border



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FEEDING THE MACHINE

Dateline magazine looks at the stories behind the stories. All offerings will be considered, from articles and photo essays to letters, essays, haiku or sonnets. How you covered a story, what you think about how journalism works, or even some gossip for the Soi Whispers column – send it all in, to editor Patrick Barta (Patrick.Barta@wsj.com) or deputy editor Simon Montlake (montlake@loxinfo.co.th). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar coupons.

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From the President...

By Ian Williams, President



Do not feed the birds. They are out to get you. That beady-eyed pigeon doesn't just want your kebab – he wants your life.

Or so says Anorak.co.uk, a satirical web site that keeps tabs – and pokes fun – at the U.K. newspapers, and has been monitoring coverage of bird flu. It's accompanied by a picture of an elderly man having a flu jab – “Now count slowly down to the end of the world,” a nurse tells him.

Is that funny or just terribly complacent?

The conventional view seems to be that tens of millions of people worldwide will die and the global economy will be crippled when the killer flu mutates and sweeps the globe. Indeed, barely a day passes without another apocalyptic prediction from a health professional or economist.

I don't claim to be an expert, not by a mile, but I think it is safe to say that the science is far from clear. We don't know if the virus will mutate, how or when. Parallels with the 1918 pandemic are dubious.

Eight years after it first emerged in Hong Kong, bird flu remains largely a bird problem with a small number of infections in humans who've been in close contact with sick birds.

In the meantime, thousands of people in Asia are still dying annually from supposedly preventable diseases, and there is a danger that unnecessary fear of bird flu may end up doing more economic damage than the disease itself.

Yes, we need to be aware of the very real danger of a pandemic, and it is sensible to take some precautions. But unless there's a sense of proportion from experts tempted to use hype to raise public awareness – and from those of us reporting on the issue – it's just going to result in public cynicism.

This was one theme of a November Programme at the Club, when local representatives from the WHO and Asian Development Bank shared a platform with Time magazine's Kay Johnson. All agreed on the need to navigate a more measured path between apathy and panic. So much of what we've been seeing (and reporting) in recent months has veered sharply towards the latter.

We've had another busy season of programmes. We are

immensely grateful to Angkhana Neelapaichit, the brave wife of missing Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaichit, for addressing the club.

It is now about two years since Somchai, a strong defender of the rights of Muslims in southern Thailand, was abducted on the streets of Bangkok.

The lack of progress in properly investigating Somchai's disappearance is a disgrace—and will remain a terrible blot on Thailand's increasingly shaky human rights record until more answers are provided by the authorities.

That evening looked at the issue of disappearances, allegedly at the hands of the authorities, in the South. It is testament to the climate of fear that now prevails that two of our speakers, who have been working in the South, asked not to be named ahead of our programme.

As a press club we feel duty-bound to continue to highlight and examine the terrible situation in the South.

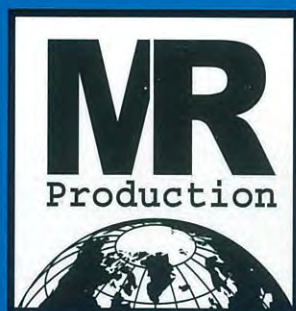
December, of course, saw the anniversary of the tsunami that brought such terrible destruction to parts of the Andaman coast, and we had a number of events to commemorate that, and features in this issue of *Dateline*. We also have another topical story from Joe Cochrane of Newsweek about the most recent Bali bombings.

If there is a theme of this issue, though, it is Unseen Thailand – aspects of the Kingdom that don't often get reported and which most of us don't usually see.

Michael Topffer, who writes a lot of crime-related stories for Swedish newspapers, describes how he covered a particularly sordid story in Pattaya involving a Swedish tourist, and the ethical conflicts he had to confront while covering it.

We also have a story on Bang Krachao, a Bangkok-area neighborhood tucked into a bend in the Chao Phraya that's protected from development by the government, and what it's like to live in a bit of a 1940s time capsule somewhat in the heart of the city. We also have a photo essay looking at Thai boxing.

Last but not least, check out the “letter from Pittsburgh” by Dan Lovering, long-time FCCT board member, who recently moved to that city to report for AP. Talk about culture shock!



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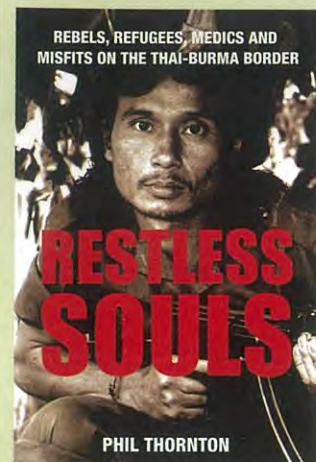
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EVENTS



gem dealers, prostitutes, scavengers, rebel soldiers and drug dealers inhabit the shadows. The photos are included in the new book "Restless Souls," available at FCCT sponsor Asia Books.

FEBRUARY – BOXING ON THE THAILAND-BURMA BORDER

It's not your typical Muay Thai: Fighters don't wear gloves. Victory is not by points, but by knockout or submission. Freelance writer and photographer Timothy Syrota went deep into this brutal world to document the lives of fighters, trainers, and fans who keep kickboxing alive on the border.

JANUARY - RESTLESS SOULS

"Restless Souls" is an exhibition of photographs by journalist Phil Thornton, who spent five years crossing illegally into Burma to find the families, freedom fighters, teachers and medics resisting the Burmese regime. The photos offer a tragic, bizarre, and sometimes funny journey through the war zone and the underbelly of the Thai border town of Mae Sot, where refugees, "mercenary" adventurers, migrant workers,

MARCH – IN THE SHADOW OF WAR: IMAGES OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE PEOPLE 1969 TO 1972

FCCT member Brennon Jones filed as a conscientious objector to the U.S. war in Vietnam. But he chose to fulfill his two years of alternative military service in South Vietnam as a photographer and journalist. Jones's exhibition, "In the Shadow of War" is a portrait of the Vietnamese people and their courage as they strived to go about their lives even as war engulfed them.

APRIL – CIVIL RESISTANCE: THE DARFUR CONFLICT

In Darfur, Sudan, where a new war broke out in 2003, nearly 180,000 people have died from violence, hunger, and disease. Kosuke Okahara, a photographer who grew up in Tokyo, documented the conflict between October 2004 and January 2005. The result is "Civil Resistance," a photo exhibition that tells the story from both the government and rebel side.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

FCCT T-shirts are here! In anticipation of its 50th anniversary this year, the FCCT is selling cool T-shirts featuring new art work. They're 100% cotton, of course. And at 300 baht – 400 baht for non-members—they're a bargain. Buy one now before supply runs out. Better yet, buy 30, and hand them out to your friends, neighbors and distant relatives. You'll be supporting FCCT, press freedom, and the cotton industry. Available at the FCCT bar while supplies last.

Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand responds to concerns about the book, Bangkok Inside Out: In December, the FCCT wrote to the Royal Thai Government Minister of Culture asking for clarification regarding the government's apparent opposition to the book, Bangkok Inside Out. For more information about the Club's effort on behalf of this book and press freedom in general, go to the Club's website at www.fccthai.com.

SOI WHISPERS

Rodney Re-invented as Restaurateur: Veteran FEER correspondent and past FCCT president Rodney Tasker was supposed to be going into genteel retirement in Chiang Mai – but he can't recall being busier. He's acting as a consultant to a fishing lure venture and to the Irrawaddy magazine – and, listen to this -- he's got himself a restaurant, the Primavera Mediterranean Restaurant. Since its opening in December, it has done a great business serving Greek, Spanish and Italian fare on an open-air terrace overlooking the old town moat. The restaurant is located along the moat opposite Ridges Amora Hotel.

Now Lavazza coffee is available at FCCT CLUB.

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Letter from Pittsburgh

Earlier this year, former FCCT board member/Associated Press reporter **Dan Lovering** departed boring Bangkok for the wild life of Pittsburgh, Pa. He recently wrote to Dateline with some insights on his new home, his new AP job, and America's love for guns.

Dear friends:

Greetings from the Steel City!

I arrived in Pittsburgh pretty recently, but I'm still getting to know this once-thriving industrial center. I've moved into a spacious apartment in one of the city's historic districts and recently bought a car – a trusty Subaru.

My belongings arrived from Bangkok recently after being stopped and searched in New York by the U.S. Homeland Security Department. (And to think I shook hands with former Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge at the FCCT only last year!)

My apartment is strewn with cardboard boxes and items from my Bangkok house – old enamel shop signs, Buddha statues, the odd wood carving. They're pleasant reminders of life there, which is so completely different. Instead of enduring tropical heat, I'm now concerned with heating my apartment, built in the 1890s, as snow falls outside.

Besides a few Thai restaurants, there's little that resembles Southeast Asia in western Pennsylvania. There are many traces of the past in Pittsburgh, where many residents once worked at steel mills or coal mines. One bumper sticker reads: "Coal miners do it in the dark."

Hunting is very popular here. I'm told the wilderness around Pittsburgh will soon start crackling with gunfire as the "big game" season opens. A local newspaper, The Bradford Era, ran a headline recently that said it all: "Bear season opens; 115 kills." An accompanying photo showed a smiling hunter displaying a 392-pound (178-kilogram) black bear he had shot. Local sporting goods stores – and national chain stores – advertise an array of rifles and pistols.

Like Southeast Asia, however, there are plenty of bizarre news stories here. My first assignment was to cover the sentencing of a gunsmith accused of making World War II-style



Dan and his trusty new Subaru.

Bear season opens; 115 kills

Kerry Rosinski is shown with a 392-pound (dressed weight) black bear. Rosinski shot the bear in the Lewis Run area at 9 a.m. Monday. It was the second largest bear to be weighed by midday at the bear check station. This is Rosinski's second bear in three years harvested in the same area. The bear's live weight was estimated at 462 pounds.

By FRANKIE LONG
 The Bradford Era photo by Frankie Long

machine guns and arming a local militia. Grisly murders and shooting sprees don't seem unusual.

But it's a far cry from what I'd gotten accustomed to over the past five years, and even the US cities where I'd lived before. Pittsburgh is close to rural America, the Heartland. People are fanatical about sports, so much so that local television stations interrupted their programming recently for a live report on a 15-minute knee operation done on the star quarterback of the local football team, the Steelers. The city seems to freeze in its tracks when games are on.

More broadly, the country has changed noticeably since I left five years ago. People are deeply divided about politics, and they're angry on all sides. Many cars have magnetic yellow ribbons stuck on them – a show of support for troops in Iraq. American flags adorn highway overpasses. People talk of relatives serving in Iraq or Afghanistan.

On the brighter side, there's a surprisingly vibrant cultural life in Pittsburgh – a legacy of the fortunes made here in years past. Museums, concerts, universities and some good book stores are all close at hand.

I hope you're all well in Bangkok and that you'll consider a visit to the 'Burgh, as it's called, if you happen to be passing this way. I'll take you to a ball game!

Best,
 Dan

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Pattaya Vice

As a Bangkok-based correspondent for the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, **Michael Töpffer** gets to cover a lot of bizarre stories – especially tales of Swedes in trouble in Thailand. He has written about Swedish pedophiles, arsonists, victims of fraud and even a Swedish Falun Gong activist. Through it all, he's seen a seamy side of Thailand – and the expats who pass through – that few reporters ever encounter. But few of those stories matched a recent piece, in which a run-of-the-mill tabloid investigation culminated in a face-to-face encounter with a suspected killer.



TV footage from the lobby at the hotel in Pattaya shows the suspected killer dragging a heavy bag towards a waiting taxi.

Expressen's coverage got off to a very bad start. Swedish print rival *Aftonbladet* broke the story – and we totally missed it! “Swedish man suspected of killing woman in Pattaya,” read the headline. But the article contained only sketchy information: A body of a woman had been found and the police had tracked it down to a hotel room in Pattaya, where a 40-year old Swedish man had been staying.

And there were no pictures, which is something both *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* heavily rely on to present their news in a lively tabloid style. It was clear *Aftonbladet* had received a late night tip-off and called in the story over the phone.

Shortly afterwards, my editor was on the phone. “Michael, go down there and get us the whole story. Get us pictures; get us witnesses,” he said.

I immediately called my assistant, Thanutvorn, and asked her to prepare herself for some hard work in Pattaya. Thanutvorn got in a taxi, picked me up on the way, and we sped out of Bangkok.

Over the years, I have made a few trips to Pattaya to investigate and cover crime. This seaside town seems to act like a magnet to all sorts of dubious characters. Not all visitors to Thailand are nice and law-abiding people. And Swedish criminals have a tendency to like Thailand and Pattaya.

Whether this is due to the famous Thai hospitality, the country's lax visa rules, or just the good beaches and cheap beer, I will leave unsaid.

Whatever the cause, in early 2005, the Swedish minister of justice paid a visit to Thailand and told the press he was concerned about Swedish motorcycle-gangs and organized crime setting their feet down in Thailand.

Rumors are rife that millions of dollars from crime in Sweden are being laundered through investments in Pattaya businesses.

Doing investigative journalism in this town is both difficult and dangerous. You can't be too nosy. A colleague of mine was once threatened after getting too close to a story, and I was eager to keep a low profile.

The two senior police officers we first met at the station in Pattaya smiled as we entered. “Two Swedish journalists just left – a reporter and a photographer,” one of them said. “Well, of course,” I thought to myself. *Aftonbladet* has its Thailand team working on the case, too. They were in the lead, but *Expressen* would soon get the upper hand.

The officers were very professional in dealing with the media, which to my experience is often the case in Thailand. They told us where the body had been found, at which hotel, and how the killing had taken place. The Swedish man had apparently strangled the woman, and later crushed her head to the floor after a fight between the two erupted in the shower.

We were told that the suspect had kept the body in the room for a few days, not even letting housecleaning in. Only when it started decomposing – and smelling – had the suspect removed

the body and checked out from the hotel.

Police also provided us with something really newsworthy: Pictures of camera footage from the hotel lobby, showing a shadowy figure pulling a heavy sports bag down the stairs, through the lobby and into a waiting taxi.

“That's the suspect,” said the policemen. “And in the bag is the body. We know it, because that's where we found it” later.

Thanutvorn and I went straight to the hotel. The owner was reluctant to talk – fearing bad publicity – and he refused to show us room 501 where the killing had taken place.

After a while, smooth-talking Thanutvorn managed to get him talking, and I got hold of two witnesses, both Swedes. They had been in the lobby and had seen the suspect pulling the bag to the taxi. “Of course I had no clue what was inside, but I remember being surprised someone had such a heavy bag,” one of them said.

Later, we managed to track down the motorcycle taxi driver who found the bag on a vacant land plot in central Pattaya. The story I wrote was good. But so was *Aftonbladet*'s. It had pretty much the same information, including the hotel camera pictures.

What was interesting, though, was information included in articles written by *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet* reporters back in Sweden. Background checks had revealed that the suspected killer had served 10 years in the French Foreign Legion. He was a mercenary and a commando.

“So, this is the guy I am dealing with,” I thought to myself. A professional killer.

Not much happened in the following days. I reported on the nationwide manhunt and the reward offered by some businessmen in Pattaya for information leading to the arrest. As the victim was unidentified, there were no relatives I could talk to.

I could do nothing but wait for the police to arrest the suspect until an unexpected call from a news editor changed everything.

“The commando just called us from Thailand,” she said. “He wants to talk. He wants to give his view of what happened. He wants to see you. Can you?”

I don't know why he chose to contact us and not *Aftonbladet*. Either he had liked our reporting or, more likely, *Expressen* was normally his preferred newspaper.

Suddenly I had a problem. Should I meet this potentially dangerous suspect on the run? I wasn't bothered by the ethical issue of giving a seemingly guilty man a forum to elicit sympathy from the public or somehow try to diminish his role in the killing. That was an issue purely for the publisher and my editors.

What bothered me was Thai law. What does it say? Am I, as a Thai resident, obliged to tell the police where a criminal is hiding? Would I

as a reporter be compelled to testify? What were my rights? And what were the killer's rights?

Having been in Thailand for a few years, I should of course have read the law. Now the clock was ticking. If we did not reply shortly, he would probably turn to *Aftonbladet*.

The problem was who to ask. I couldn't really call Thai police and ask if it was okay for me to meet the killer. And I couldn't really ask any fellow crime reporters, as they would then get hold of the story.

I decided to come to the FCCT and ask some senior friends and colleagues that don't work in print media and don't cover crime.

It turned out that no one really knew. No one was sure if I could meet the suspected killer without jeopardizing my own status as a journal-



ist. Someone said I probably could see him. But that “probably” was not a good enough answer.

Jeanne Hallacy was more direct, putting a more humane face on the issue. “Michael, why would you want to see a killer? He is a dangerous man. Think about your own security. Don't risk your own life,” she said.

Finally I decided not to meet him. Not so much for my own safety but because I did not know if I was about to break any Thai laws.

I called the editor and explained the circumstances, that I work under Thai, not Swedish, laws and that I was more concerned about my future in Thailand than this particular story.

I simply asked to be disconnected from the case. My request was approved immediately without further questions.

I remained in the dark for another three days until *Expressen* splashed a giant headline on the front page. A “Killer Talks.” The commando, Mr. Kenneth Eriksson, admitted to the crime but claimed he had acted in self-defense. Not much was said about the reason for the killing or, for obvious reasons, where Mr. Eriksson was hiding.

I learned later that *Expressen* flew in one of

Mr. Kenneth Eriksson turns himself over to the Swedish Embassy in March 2005. He had been on the run for about two weeks, after killing a woman in Pattaya. Photo by: Michael Töpffer

Across the Great Divide

By **Simon Montlake**/Photos by **Patrick Barta**

its crime reporters from Stockholm who secretly met with Mr Eriksson somewhere in Thailand. The reporter returned to Sweden on the next available flight and the story was not published until he was safely home.

A few more days passed. The Thai police continued hunting for the accused killer and *Expressen* staff reporters in Sweden wrote articles in which the man's father repeatedly urged his son to give himself up. This seemed to pay off.

I was at home cooking spaghetti Bolognese when there was yet another call from the editor. "We have been informed that the killer will turn himself over to Swedish police liaison officers at the Swedish embassy sometime this afternoon. Go there and get us the story."

Leaving my Bolognese half done, I grabbed my cameras, jumped on a motorcycle taxi to the Skytrain, and headed to the embassy.

I stood waiting for almost two hours, until a well-built man with a small backpack came walking towards the building. I immediately recognized Mr Eriksson from my colleague's interview a few days earlier. He looked very tired, dirty and distressed, his eyes staring anxiously.

"Mr. Kenneth," I shouted, standing a few meters away. He looked up, surprised to see me. I introduced myself and asked if he would spare me a few minutes, which he did. We had an interesting talk during which he politely answered all my questions. He told me why he had taken the decision to give himself up and he gave me more information about the killing, how he managed to get away and where he had been hiding.

He again admitted to the killing but said he regretted it and that he had been under the influence of amphetamines and alcohol.

He told me that as a soldier he had been in battle many times but emphasized he had never killed an innocent person. He was surprisingly articulate and polite, but also appeared to be under severe stress. He knew he was taking his last steps as a free man for many years to come.

I took his picture and then accompanied him into the elevator and up to the embassy on the 20th floor. It was just the two of us in the small elevator. I tried some small talk as the elevator slowly made its way upward. It took forever, but the commando-turned-killer stayed calm.

We got out of the elevator, knocked on the door and the Swedish policeman, who was waiting for him, turned the handle. His eyes opened wide when he saw me.

"What are you doing here?"

"He was just outside waiting," Mr. Eriksson said as he walked in. "I didn't know him either." The two men shook hands and disappeared and I had an exclusive!

It was obvious that the embassy would shortly turn Mr. Eriksson over to Thai police in Pattaya. That meant Thai media would get the story and it would also be out on the wires – and reach Sweden.

That posed another problem for *Expressen*: What to do with my story! It was still lunchtime in Sweden with many hours to go until the next day's paper. *Aftonbladet* and other media as yet had no clue Mr. Eriksson had been arrested. *Expressen* decided to withhold the information and not publish anything about the arrest on the Web in the hope that no other Swedish media would get hold of the story, giving us an exclusive in the next day's paper.

But *Expressen* wanted me to prepare a story for the Web just in case it broke. I wrote a story and then waited. About an hour later, the phone rang.

"*Aftonbladet* now has the arrest on the Web, but it contains nothing. Only a few lines that the killer has turned himself over. No quotes, no pictures, nothing, so we'll run your story" now, the editor said.

A few minutes later, *Expressen* scored. On the Web, my story about the arrest appeared, along with my interview with Mr. Eriksson, including the pictures outside the embassy, and quotes from the police.

It was the biggest story of the day in Sweden, and we were far ahead of our rival.

My interview was the last with Mr. Eriksson. *Aftonbladet* never got a word with him. Both newspapers did do interesting follow-ups, with analysis of his prospects in the trial and stories about the police re-enactment a few days later.

Mr. Eriksson is currently locked up, awaiting trial in Pattaya, which is set to start October 2006.



Bang Krachao is known as the 'green lung' of Bangkok, a large expanse of orchards, canals, temples and houses, tucked into a bend in the Chao Phraya river. Home to around 40,000 people, it's a dash of country life in the urban jungle.

Its name apparently refers to its shape when viewed from the air. Try for yourself: ascend one of Bangkok's gleaming skyscrapers and look south. While the rest of the city sparkles with electric light, a dark shadow is cast on the far side of the river, broken only by pinpricks of low-rise living.

Whoever decided in the 1970s to cap development in Bang Krachao must have realized that a 'green lung' was an environmental necessity. Indeed, this patch of greenery is probably all that keeps Bangkok from choking on its noxious emissions. That may change when a new ring road opens next year, offering a faster commute to the city. Already there are reports of

land speculation and lobbying to relax rules that limit the amount of forest that can be cleared for development.

For now, a day out in Bang Krachao is a day away from urban life, a dip into rural Thailand, with all the electrified bustle that entails. A bike



Michael Töpfer,
correspondent for Swedish
tabloid *Expressen*. Photo by:
Kullawee Pongpattanaajit





is the ideal mode of transport, as mile after mile of concrete pathways are available to explore. On a smoggy Sunday, we began by crossing the river by long-tail boat from a tiny pier near the port. With our bikes lying flat across the boat, we zipped across the dun-colored water, avoiding the convoys of covered barges heading downstream. Once there, we skirted the dogs lying in the sun at the riverside temple, one of several within the reserve, and followed a pathway into the mangrove forest.

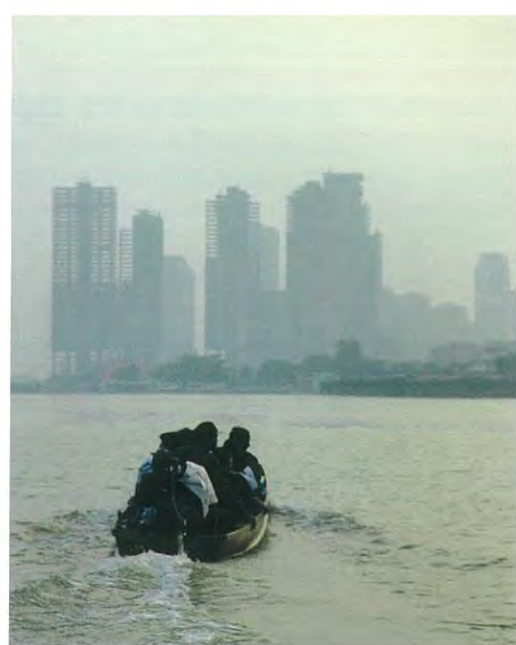
A meter-wide pathway may sound like ample space for cyclists, but that's not allowing for the sharp right-angle turns and knots of pedestrian traffic, particularly at the entrances to houses. Sturdy shoes and responsive brakes are a must. Some villages have also installed speed bumps, presumably to slow motorbike daredevils. When

you tire of the pathways, or get hopelessly lost there are two-lane roads that loop around the reserve. Join a tour group if you prefer guidance (details below).

Turning Bang Krachao into another Bangkok suburb would be bad for the environment, sure. But imagine living in a swanky apartment by the river, surrounded by lush forest and serenaded by bird song? But if everyone does the same, Bangkok's green lung could end up looking more like the diseased lungs that appear as warnings on Thai cigarette packets.



SpiceRoads leads bicycle tours of Bang Krachao. Call 02 712 5305 for details or visit: www.spiceroads.com



Boxing On the Border

Story and Photos by **Tim Syrota**

When a boxer in Bangkok deliberately loses a fight, takes a 50,000 baht payout, and leaves in a hurry, where does he go next? It's a scenario out of 'Pulp Fiction', but for one Thai boxer this was a real-life dilemma. In his case, the answer was the Thai-Burma border, where bare-knuckles boxing rules the roost.

This isn't muay thai. Forget the tradition and ceremony – and the gloves. Muay thai boxers dance in the ring before they fight, and show respect for their opponents, trainers and referees. During the bout, ringside judges award points for blows landed and blocked, and other skills.

No, this is boxing katchii, without gloves, an unruly, bawdy, brawling cousin of muay thai. It's the way that Thai boxing once was and Burmese boxing still is. Crepe bandages wrap around knuckles, not to soften blows but to bind hands together and stop them from breaking on impact. The rules are simple: no gouging, head butting, hair pulling, blows to the groin, or blows to a fallen opponent. Victory is not by points, but by knockout or submission. As a result, fights can be brutal. Knees crunch into kidneys, elbows into ears, feet into ribs and fists into faces, as blood splatters the canvas and muscled fighters collapse like rag dolls.

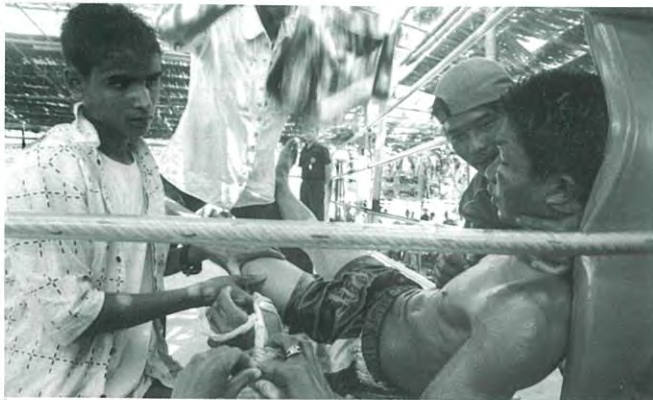
"I am a little scared when I fight without gloves," says Li Hti Dhet, aged 14, whose dream is to fight for Thailand in the Olympics. "It's dangerous but it's exciting, a thrill."



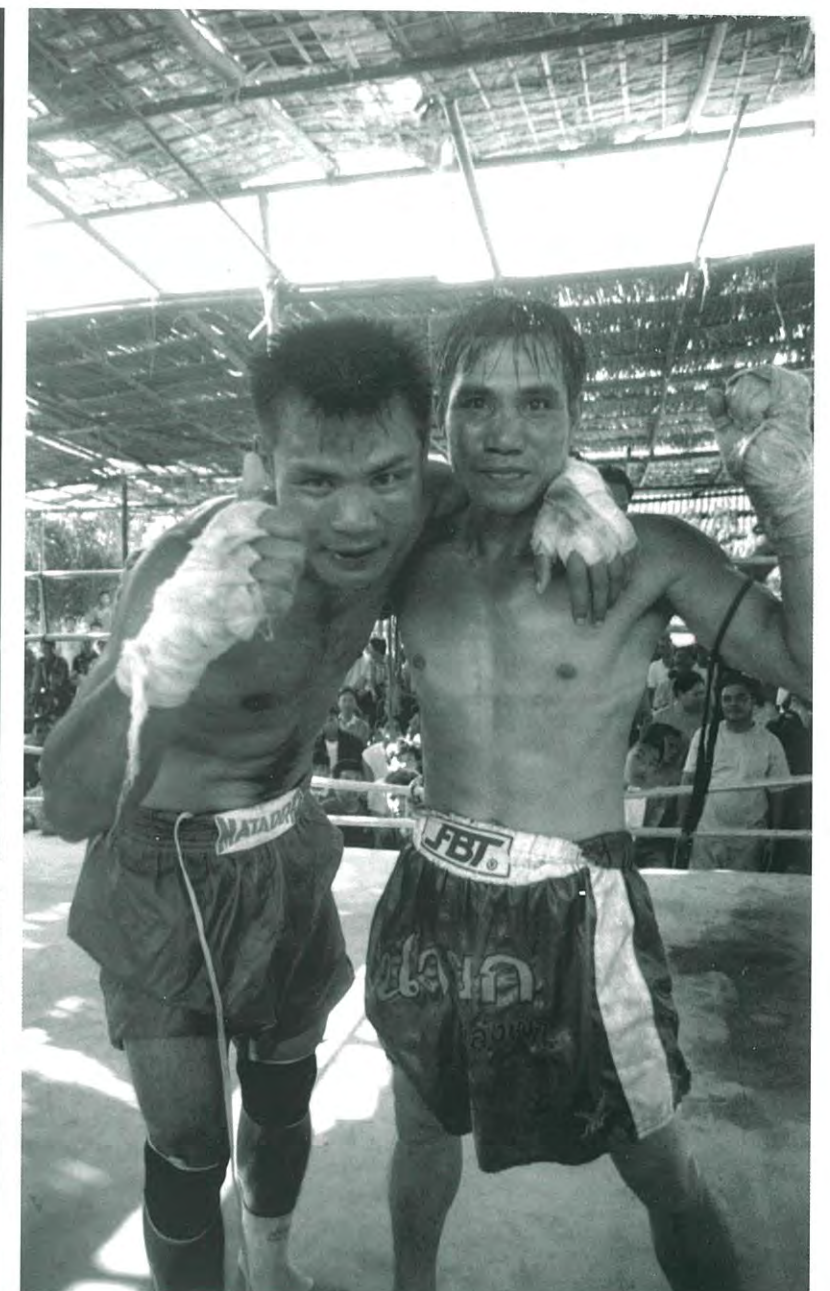
Unlike the nightly bouts of muay thai staged in Thai cities, boxing along the Thai-Burma border occurs infrequently. Most fights are staged during Buddhist holidays such as Loi Krathong and Songkran shared by Thai and Burmese. Then there are the irregular bouts in the towns and villages on both sides of the border. Fights in the grounds of temples, fights at night with dangling lights, fights under makeshift thatched roofs, and fights to celebrate national days of Burmese insurgent armies.

Before the fights can begin, matches must be made. On the first night of Loi Krathong, 40 eager pugilists line up in the ring, eyeing potential opponents. Thais face off against Burmese. The methodology of match-making is simple: boxers are measured shoulder to shoulder, bicep and abdominals to bicep and abdominals; and boxers, trainers, and a Karen referee respected for his knowledge and experience give their verdict. A shake or nod of their heads are necessary for matches to be sanctified.

One boxer is 23 with two previous fights, and has been living for two months in Thailand as an illegal immigrant, working in a Thai-owned furniture factory for 90 baht a day. "When I hear the sound of the Burmese crowd, I am excited and it makes me want to fight. I have Burmese blood," he says. The following night, he enters the ring and fights for three rounds, the maximum for the Loi Krathong bouts. It's a draw and he receives 300 baht. A win would have netted him 600 baht.



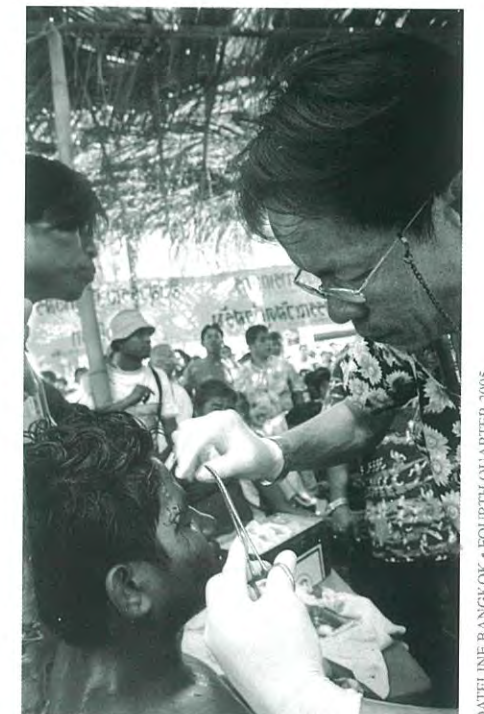
Tim Syrota is an Australian photographer living in Thailand. A full exhibition of his boxing photos will be on display in the FCCT Clubhouse in February.



Another evening, I watch as Thai boxers line up against Burmese opponents. The Thais are on top, knocking out the Burmese one after another. One fighter breaks the ribs of his opponent within the first minute. In a show of arrogance he taunts another Burmese to step into the ring, and a giant boxer steps out the shadows. He moves to the centre and begins a slow-motion dance, an intimidating mixture of power and grace.

The Thai fighter is shaken and exits the ring, leaving the Burmese audience incensed and howling derision at the Thais. "Kill the Thais. Break their bodies," they cry. Centuries of Burmese-Thai animosity and prejudice erupt, fuelled by alcohol, fuelled by dead-end factory jobs and the violent intensity of the spectacle. Armed soldiers intervene to prevent bloodshed.

A bemused friend asked me why boxing has become the focus of my work. I offer this reply: "Because it's basic, charged, compelling, sometimes horrifyingly so, and it can be so intense that it borders on a surreal insanity. Why? Because this is boxing on the border, boxing katchii, muay thai boxing in the raw."



Back To the Beach

*A year ago, former AFP reporter/freelance correspondent **Jack Barton** was one of the first reporters on the scene after the devastating December, 26 tsunami. A year later, he returned, and found that many of the scars remain.*

Rounding the final bend leading down from the hill, past the dazed faces and endless limp white bundles, Khao Lak lay before us like an uncensored scene from hell.

While satellites would soon start relaying images of crushed walls, scattered children's toys and all that is fit to broadcast, the overriding scene on the ground, one day after the waves had hit, was of human devastation – disbelief still written on lifeless faces – and its inescapable miasma.

Rounding the same corner one year on, the mud and salt-scarred flat land still betrays the physical act of destruction. But the eerie red and orange flash of emergency lights through

dust whipped up by bulldozers and rescue work has been replaced by re-opened shops waiting patiently for the infrequent business of NGOs and volunteers. Shattered hotels walls have been resurrected and re-plastered and, through an extraordinary perseverance of human spirit coupled with the generosity of countless outsiders, a semblance of 'normal' life appears to have re-emerged.

The Indian Ocean tsunami killed nearly 6,000 people in Thailand. While that figure may look modest among some quarter of a million lost lives in countries ranging from Indonesia to Somalia, the impact of Thailand's loss was no less devastating to local individuals, communities and tourists.

Our Man In Khao Lak: Jack Barton on the scene.



The first people I spoke to after arriving at Phuket hospital on December 26, 2005 were two Swedish women, naked but for hospital gowns tied flimsily across their bare backs.

Still utterly overwhelmed and unable to process what had happened to them, they sat and quietly listed lost family.

"My husband and 14-year-old daughter are missing since we were swept off the second floor of our hotel on Phi Phi Island," said one of the women, clutching the arm of her teenage son.

"My friend Lena lost sight of her husband and two boys aged eight and fifteen," she said, gesturing to her silent friend. "Of course they are dead," she added in the same unfaltering voice.

Looking up from my note pad into the faces of the two women, I realized that though the physical destruction was done, the full extent of the emotional damage still lay ahead.

In the days, weeks and months that followed, that all-encompassing trauma was met with a selfless generosity at every level from government, nearby communities and victims themselves.

But that generosity was not extended to everyone, and the petty looting which caused some disgust at the outset would eventually emerge as one of the lesser acts of heartlessness amid an otherwise overwhelmingly positive response.

One year on, such cracks in the recovery effort remain as deep as ever, leaving thousands of people little better off today than they were in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

Dropping in at a community centre to speak with Burmese economic migrants, I met with a vivacious young woman whose spirit belied the tragedy of losing a family and then being denied the right to seek their remains.

"My husband was clutching both of our children when the water hit them," she recalled.

"I had identification and work papers but they were washed away and even now I still cannot search for their remains because I will be arrested," she said, adding Burmese workers such as herself had little doubt about who many of the more than 1000 still unidentified bodies belong to.

She continues to earn a meager living husking coconuts for kapok at about 75 baht a day. But in the grey area of being a legal economic immigrant without any form of identification, she is only one nervous notch above thousands of her compatriots working illegally in trades such as rubber tapping, construction and fishing along the coast.

In earthquake-devastated Kashmir, phone



Clear blue sky and beautiful sand at Surin Beach, Phuket, welcoming tourists.

lines that had lain dormant for decades were recently re-connected and the border opened to alleviate a suffering population. Actions such as these between bitter rivals India and Pakistan beg the question: Why wasn't something as simple as a 'no identification questions asked' zone established around any of the body identification areas in Thailand? Why wasn't any type of amnesty offered that might have alleviated the suffering of undocumented Burmese who lost family and friends and who have never been able to identify and claim bodies for fear of arrest, incarceration and deportation?

Driving past unoccupied new housing and nervous construction in towns such as Ban Nam Khem, it is obvious that it is not just the Burmese who continue to suffer 12-months on.

An estimated 15,000 Thais in 25 villages found their home ownership rights erased or redrawn by wealthy and well-connected individuals and companies.

The community at Ban Nai Rai had lived on the land for about 100 years before a pineapple company laid claim to it in the wake of the tsunami. In the hardest hit town of Ban Nam Khem, there is a complex legal case underway, but for most people the strategy is simply to invade the land they once called home.

"(The government) had good intentions from the start and showed impressive care for the people, but a lack of follow-through led directly to blunders and so much wasted money," said Senator Kraisak Choonhavan, who has been closely monitoring the post-tsunami recovery.

Only a handful of some 1000 houses built in four locations has been occupied due to a lack of consultation with the intended inhabitants,

Covering a Crisis

The latest Bali bombing was big news. It was also a reminder for journalists: When covering a big, breaking story, it pays to have an emergency plan in place, writes Joe Cochrane, Southeast Asia correspondent for Newsweek.

The recent suicide bombings on Bali brought on a horrible sense of déjà vu for the locals and tourists on that island, not to mention myself. I vividly remember stumbling into my apartment in the wee hours after a typical Bangkok Saturday night in October 2002 and receiving a frantic phone call from my editor in New York. "We're less than an hour to print time," he said. "What should we do about Bali?" And I will never forget my response: "What the hell happened on Bali?"

About seven hours later, I saw what the hell happened – in person. After learning of the bombings on two nightclubs in Kuta Beach, I frantically packed, rushed to the airport, flew to Bali, went straight to the blast sites, reported all afternoon and began filing radio and print stories for Newsweek's website that evening. Luckily, my adrenaline was running high because between the Bangkok party, plane flight and work, I didn't sleep for 36 hours. But I did have time to start smoking cigarettes after quitting for nearly a year. (I've since quit again.)

It may sound like a mammoth task to get to a news story some 2,000 miles away in a matter of hours, but for many correspondents who use Bangkok as a base to cover Asia, it's par for the course. And I have it easier since I don't work in television. I call my personal emergency deployment the "Two Call, Two Pack, One Shut," which in translation means: I make two calls, one to an airline to get a ticket and one to an airport taxi service; I pack two suitcases, one with work clothes and one with my laptop, chargers and contact phone books; I shut the door to my room as I pack because my cat gets really, really pissed off at me when I travel, and I don't want her to know I'm leaving until the last possible second.

The final task is easier. I knock on the door of my maid, who lives next door, and point a Thai-language calendar in her face so she knows when I will return and how long she has to feed and console my just-abandoned cat. Then it's luggage into the taxi's trunk – after checking for the fifth and final time that my passport and ticket are in the laptop bag – and into the backseat for the ride to the airport. I often use this time to call or SMS colleagues to find out if they're already on the scene, and if so, in which hotel all the journalists are staying. (We tend to congregate together for purposes of sharing both information and bar bills.) As the adrenaline of packing and planning wears off, the rest of the trip is usually a blur until the plane touches down in the crisis-hit area du jour.

Most journalists have different priorities and strategies when they land in a crisis zone, whether it's a war, terrorist attack or natural disaster. In some cases, like the 2002 Bali attacks and last year's tsunami, I did the exact same thing in each location: I hired a car and driver at the airport, went straight to the disaster site, then to the morgue, and then to the hospital to interview survivors.

But other times you do the exact opposite of what common sense would dictate. After the most recent Bali bombings in October, I didn't bother going to Bali, instead flying straight to Jakarta to begin reporting. My thinking may sound fiendish, but journalistically speaking, it was spot on: I work for a



Holidays from Hell: Joe Cochrane on the road

weekly magazine whose deadline had passed, there were only 22 dead, and body parts and crying relatives were of no use to me. I had to write a forward-looking analytical piece, and the country's leading anti-terrorism officials and private security analysts were all in Jakarta.

I'm not alone in treating death and destruction with such detachment. Most journalists learn to do it, and I earned my stripes in conflict zones from East Timor to Iraq. And even though I have more time than my daily news colleagues for naval gazing, most times I'm out the door as quickly as them. Hitting a conflict zone on the fly is like being in a tragic version of "Alice in Wonderland" – quite surreal and dreamlike. Once you do it enough, though, you get the art of getting on the scene and operating down to a fine science. But it never hurts to get some sleep first.



according to Kraissak.

"They placed them all on government land and not the original villages that people want to go back to... they bulldozed the whole area and built without thinking about careers such as people being fishermen."

Driving through Ban Nam Khem, a small army of Thai and foreign volunteers continue to help locals rebuild. But fishing boats remain stacked like discarded timber behind the village, and the mood remains somber.

Volunteers and survivors here jokingly grumble about issues such as a glut of churches. But they also pointed to other silent, hard-to-quantify problems.

"The rise of alcoholism among local communities, especially in Khao Lak, is noticeable," said Norwegian tsunami survivor Anders Ericsson, whose two-year-old son Ragnar was wrenched from his arms by the final wave.

Efforts have been made to counsel both adults and children at school, but assessing the needs of such a large and diverse population will probably never be achieved.

Re-visiting the shattered remains of the Khao Lak shorefront bungalow where Anders and his son were staying when the water hit, I was reminded once again of how the tsunami

illuminated human strengths and frailties, both in the face of the wave as well as in the complexity of rebuilding lives and communities in its aftermath.

Here, away from the main road, the bungalows sat as they did on the day after the tsunami, debris still clogging what little was left of their remains.

Locals and foreign survivors say the healing process is also in much the same shape as these physical shards on the flattened landscape, and they welcomed the recent anniversary as a chance for the outside world to remember and for others to come together.

The Thai Government planned to spend an estimated 500 million baht on special commemorative events last year, involving thousands of Thais and foreigners.

Driving past the now iconic grey patrol boat perched against a rubber plantation, talk of memorials and other such ways of remembering the tsunami still seems premature. But while there are mixed feelings about whether the memorial is money well-spent, or a diversion of badly needed recovery funds, there is a clear need to re-evaluate what remains to be done. And to reflect on all that has passed.



Bangkok Patana School Launches "Children of the Tsunami"

An inspirational book honouring the courage of tsunami survivors and raising funds for school children in Khao Lak

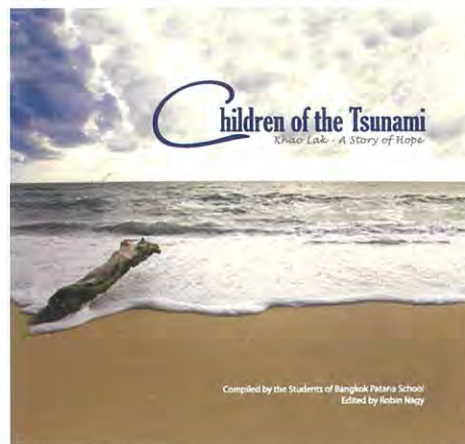
A year has passed since the Tsunami struck and affected many lives, amongst which were innocent children. An inspirational book project has been developed with the efforts of 52 students and a team of dedicated staff from Bangkok Patana School. The book is entitled 'Children of the Tsunami, Khao Lak – a Story of Hope'. This important volume not only honours the courage of tsunami survivors and the memory of those lost but also aims to raise significant funds to further the education of children affected by it.

Despite the scale of the disaster and the terrible loss of family,

friends and property, the book focuses on the positive stories that have emerged from the tragedy. On the advent of the first anniversary of the Asian tsunami, Bangkok Patana School has made a lasting contribution to the lives of these children.

Over Baht 900,000 in sponsorship funds were raised by an energetic and passionate team of children and teachers and 5,000 full colour hardback books have been printed. All profits from book sales will pay for the education of Thai children affected by the tsunami. The book will be sold in Asia Books and all good book shops in Thailand.

For more information please contact Nisa Chamat: nich@patana.ac.th Tel: 02 398 0200 x198 Fax: 02 744 5924 or visit their website: www.patana.ac.th/TsunamiRelief/book.asp



Let Them Drink Claret

The perils of oneophilia in our over-taxed city. By **Bangkok Chowhound**

It's a scenario that many a wine lover in Bangkok has encountered. You breeze by the alcohol section at the supermarket, and think, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a glass of wine with dinner?" As you approach, three young women clad in miniskirts and tight, cleavage-revealing tops spring out from behind a stack of whiskey bottles and start circling you, heels clacking. Suspense builds. Pondering your choices, you draw closer to the Californian selection.

And then the assault begins. One of the young lovelies sidles up to you, holding out a bottle of the most expensive bottle of Bordeaux, and says smilingly, "This is red, too." Never mind the inane sales pitch. What exactly are you being sold? That bottle of St. Emilion probably has bits of cork bobbing in it. Or it's been allowed to boil in the sun while waiting in its shipyard berth. In other words, it's gone bad, but it still costs you 4,000 baht.

Not only is wine-buying usually dispiriting in Bangkok, it's a positively un-proletariat experience. Wine should be proletariat. For centuries, it was the provenance of the pros as well as the bourgeoisie and the landed elite. A Sardinian, Hungarian or Alsatian peasant farmer could round off a hard day in the fields with a cheap bottle of plonk to wash down that heel of stale bread.

On a recent foray in northern Spain, the best bottle of wine that we had – heady with fruit, rich and heavy on the tongue – cost a whopping six euros. In the Basque region, two euros bought you a generous glass of txakoli – a young, tart white wine that you can drink by the bucketful and still touch your nose with your fingers. The sign of a truly democratic and civilized society is the price and availability of a glass of decent wine. And a plaza to idle away the afternoon while sipping your bouquet.

Wine – or as the Chinese would say, grape wine – is a relatively new idea in East Asia. For years, my father had at least seven different bottles of rice wine at different stages of consumption and a lone, dust-covered bottle of Mouton-Rothschild, which was past its prime by the time I was born. Now, my relatives in Taiwan and China quaff wine with their Peking Duck and store bottles of Shiraz or Cabernet-Merlot in cupboards previously reserved for Shaoxing cooking wine.

Familiarity, however, does not always breed true appreciation. Take some (but not all) wine shops in Bangkok where the selection is ridiculously, infuriatingly expensive. While import tariffs and excise duty are largely to blame for this hyperinflation, there's also the notion that wine is for high society and not the hoi polloi. And because high society in

East Asia likes to be seen doling out cash for luxury goods, let's charge an extra 800 baht on red table wine because it's from France.

Moreover, sex does not sell wine. Staffing wine shops with pretty faces doesn't really shift wine, especially when the only thing they can say about a bottle is: "This one from Australia." Wine shops of my youth were manned by middle-aged, bespectacled enthusiasts. People to whom you could say, "I'm making salmon marinated in soy sauce and ginger, what would you have with that?" or, "Is there a wine that goes with macaroni and cheese?"

But don't despair because someone has been listening to the steady stream of complaints about the wine situation in Bangkok. Central recently announced it was launching a program to ensure that wines are handled correctly and at the right temperatures all the time. It's also promised to train staff on wine knowledge, and has slapped a sticker on each bottle of wine guaranteeing its quality. And they've introduced a wider range of wines, so you're not stuck between a bottle of Jacob's Creek or Hardy's.

Now, if they could only build that plaza to idle away those hot afternoons instead of another shopping mall.



Wine shops that won't break your heart or the bank

WINE CONNECTION: Well-lit, airy wine shops with a surprising, eclectic range of Australian, Italian, French, and Argentine wines. It does sell the nasty tequila with the cap in the shape of a sombrero. But we'll forgive them for it because they also sell proper wine glasses. Locations: Soi Convent (behind Starbucks); Nana Square on Sukhumvit; V9 Restaurant in the Sofitel Silom; and Sukhumvit 31.

SILOM CELLAR: These are the people you go to when you need to ask whether Reisling will go with khrapao gai. A

wonderfully chatty and friendly owner runs this store, and he can boast of a savvy staff. You get the sense that they've actually had a tippie of what they're flogging. Location: 2nd floor of Silom Complex, right off the Saladaeng Sky Train Station.

WINE SELECTION CO., LTD.: Actually the prices on the wines sold here are not exactly wallet-friendly, but they are tasty. A noteworthy selection of wines from South Africa, a region mostly overlooked by Bangkok wine-sellers. Location: 2nd floor of Thaniya Plaza.



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