

193 taxes

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

TALKING IT OVER

BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

I am writing this week's column on Air Force One, still in the pale blue evening suit I wore to the State dinner hosted by the King and Queen of Thailand at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. My head is spinning -- and not just because it's past midnight and we're about to fly halfway around the world to get home in time for Thanksgiving. I'm mentally digesting the memorable experiences I had in Australia, the Philippines and Thailand.

I'll never forget my first sight of the Opera House in the harbor in Sydney, Australia, the solemn splendor of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, or the visual power of the aboriginal art. I'll never forget the feel of a kangaroo's fur or the expression in the eyes of a koala bear named Chelsea, the rainbow colors of the Great Barrier Reef through my snorkeling mask, or the sounds of friendly Australian voices saying "G'day" -- just like in the movies!

In the Philippines, we stayed in the MacArthur Suite in the Manila Hotel, which was Gen. MacArthur's home after he returned during World War II. In one room, there is a collection of memorabilia, including a display on the wall of all his medals and decorations. I walked around the room imagining the history that was made there. Meanwhile, history was also being made at the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting my husband attended. Manila was alight with Christmas decorations to welcome the heads of state who had come to discuss trade issues.

At the city's new cultural center, I felt ^{the warmth of friendship} warmly received by the crowd of more than 12,000 people -- most of them women. I spoke about progress being made around the world to protect women's rights and applauded the actions taken in the Philippines to promote family planning and reduce domestic violence.

After Manila, I headed to Northern Thailand, where I planned to see two projects designed to educate girls and protect them from child prostitution. When I landed at Chiang Rai, I was greeted by a troupe of 200 dancers in traditional Thai costumes and hundreds of children waving American and Thai flags.

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The first project I visited, Thai Women of Tomorrow, pays families a small stipend to permit their daughters to attend school. As I stood in front of the rows of schoolgirls dressed in uniforms of white blouses and blue skirts, I thought about how young they were and how thousands of girls their age all over the world are denied not only the opportunity to learn but the chance to be young before they grow old.

In the hills above Chiang Rai, I visited a hill-tribe village where some of the students are from. Hill-tribe girls, whose families are desperately poor, usually illiterate and frequently stateless, are especially vulnerable to exploitation. I spoke with several girls, who were clothed in their native dress, and their parents, who explained how they had decided education and job training could prepare their daughters for better and longer-lasting careers than potentially deadly lives as prostitutes.

When I returned to the airport, the full moon was up and the dancers and children were still there. Music filled the air, and the tarmac was a sea of dancing lights. The dancers had strapped candles to their delicate wrists, and children waved paper lanterns.

As our plane approached Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city, the sky was full of tiny red stars, which turned out to be hot-air paper lanterns launched as part of the annual Festival of Lights ^{Celebrating} held during the last full moon of the lunar year. It is a three-day celebration of fireworks, lanterns and candle-lit floats made of banana leaves and flowers. The Thai people believe they can load the sins of the past year and wishes for the future onto these floats. After asking for forgiveness, they then cast the floats off into a river or lake. I lit one and placed it in the Ping River, where it joined the procession.

I thought about forgiveness and hope the next day when I visited the second project of my trip, the New Life Center. Run by Rev. Lauren Bethel, an American missionary, the center gives girls rescued from prostitution a second chance at life. I also met girls from the House of Love, a shelter for former prostitutes dying from AIDS. One 18-year-old girl came in a wheelchair. She had been sold as a maid when she was 10 and then forced into prostitution. Even after she became HIV-positive, she had to keep working. Only after she became too sick with AIDS to function was she taken to the hospital. As I knelt beside her, I could see the skin stretched tightly across her face. She tried to speak but could not be heard. She was not expected to live out the week.

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Despite witnessing the ravages of AIDS and the cruel reality of how girls are still being exploited, I came away from the center hopeful and heartened. I was encouraged by the commitment of private individuals, like Rev. Bethel, the organizations that support such work and the growing willingness of governments to combat sexual exploitation and the economic and social problems that lead to it. The Thai government has enacted legislation and adopted a plan to end child prostitution. The United States has passed a law permitting the prosecution of any citizen who engages in such illegal activities. No one who saw the face of that dying girl in the wheelchair could doubt the urgency of persuading more countries to take similar steps.

So, as I fly home to my daughter, I want to give thanks for her and for all our children -- and wish all of you a happy Thanksgiving.

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seemed to be lit by
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Pam-

I have to sleep. ~~By~~

Creator's need to talk to me,

Call Tim on the plane + ask
him to wake me up.There should be enough here
for them to edit into a
column.

Thanks —

b2c

P.S. June + Sabrina know who
to call.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY

TO

June

FROM

Pam

FAX #

65709

PHONE #

OF PAGES (including cover)

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COMMENTS