Burmese Students Confer in Bloomington

After the pro-democracy demonstrations of August 1988, hundreds of Burmese students and professionals fled their country to neighboring Thailand and India, obtaining United Nations refugee status and patiently waiting for opportunities to resume their interrupted studies. In 1991, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was authorized to make funds available so that some of these students could complete their studies in the United States. There are now more than 300 Burmese students, in the United States scattered around the country in states as far apart as New York and Hawaii. Indiana has one of the largest Burmese communities in Fort Wayne.

In 1993, the Open Society Institute (OSI), an affiliate of the Soros Foundations in New York, pledged $2 million, under its Burma Project, toward scholarships for those students whose U.S. funding had run out. This summer, OSI provided grants for the students to attend the Burmese Student Seminar organized by IU’s Office of International Services (OIS) in Bloomington to familiarize themselves with the conditions of their OSI grants, to discuss their current concerns and educational objectives. The seminar hoped to encourage those who have not yet enrolled in college to complete their studies. While students share in the intense desire to return home to contribute their knowledge and skills in building a more open society, not all are unified in their approach. The seminar was thus "an opportunity to put their differences aside," said Associate Dean and Director of OIS Kenneth A. Rogers, who was chair of the executive planning committee for the seminar. Rogers served for several years as a Foreign Service officer in Burma in the 1960s.

For two days during the last weekend of July, more than 120 Burmese students and professionals gathered in Bloomington. This was the first meeting of its kind for Burmese students, and considered crucial to planning their future course. The meeting was fortuitously timed, as two weeks earlier, Burma’s military rulers had announced the release of Burmese activist Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, who had been held for almost six years under house arrest.

"As for the Burmeses students abroad . . . they must neither do anything extreme nor put their feet up and wait for democracy to happen."

Aung San Suu Kyi, July 1995

At the seminar, the students heard from a number of prominent members of the U.S. Burmese community such as Dr. Aye Nu Duersken, a recent graduate of Ball State University, and Professor Yan Naing Lwin of Western Illinois University, who co-chaired a session on student needs and concerns. OSI members, headed by Maureen Aung-Thwin, Director of the Burma Project, and Amy Yenkin, presented an overview of OSI’s grant programs and objectives. The plenary session featured a major address by Dr. La Raw Maran, president of Kachin-Americans and Friends, USA, on a model economic and social development plan for Burma, moderated by Frank Proschan (Cultural Studies, IUB) and Philip Morgan (SPEA, IUB). Also attending was a Burmese correspondent, San Myint, of the Voice of America, who sent direct dispatches from Bloomington to VOA’s Burma Service. IUB Burmese students Moe Zaw Aung, a senior in East Asian Studies, and Tun Myint, a junior in political science, assisted OIS staffers Nita Levison, Judith Brennen, and Paul Haakenson with coordination of the seminar.

During the second day, students participated in small group sessions on topics such as socioeconomic planning, rural development, health and the environment, educational reform, technology, and cultural heritage. The day was capped by a colorful Burmese Cultural Evening, with presentations of Burmese music, dances, and fashions, as well as an exhibit of Burmese arts and crafts, including paintings by contemporary artists living in the States.