The Office of International Services hosted a day of consultations July 26 at the Leo R. Dowling International Center at IU Bloomington. The theme of the event was “Development Through Education: Burma’s Future.” More than 50 Burmese refugee students along with specialists in the areas of international education and development attended.

Kenneth Rogers, associate dean for International Programs and director of the Office of International Services at IU conceived and initiated the consultations. Rogers, a former foreign service officer stationed in Burma, has been instrumental in attracting to IU several Burmese refugee student-related programs since 1993.

The consultations elicited and refined participants’ ideas for educational programs that could foster democratic, social, and economic development in Burma.

The program began with an introduction by Patrick O’Meara, dean for International Programs. O’Meara compared the inception of freedom in a repressed nation to a light breaking in darkness, and he pointed out the similarities between the current military regime of Burma with the former apartheid government of South Africa.

Following O’Meara’s introduction, the Venerable Ashin Nyanissara, one of Burma’s most renowned monks, called attention to the importance of developing “education of the heart” in tandem with pragmatic business- and administration-oriented education.

The Venerable Ashin Nyanissara made the special stop in Bloomington during his tour of the United States to deliver a dharma sermon to the large group of Burmese who had gathered for the consultations. Among the many prominent Burmese professionals in attendance were Andrew Myint-Aung, Aye Nu Duerksen, Rose Hinesly, John Mang Tling, and Yan Naing Lwin.

The first discussion session, “Educational Strategies for the Development of an Open Society and Democratic Institutions,” was moderated by John Elliott, consultant on Asia for the Inland Container Company of Indianapolis. Discussions focused on educational shortcomings that hinder Burmese living both in Burma and in exile abroad.

After lunch, the participants reconvened for a session on “Educational Strategies for the Development of a Sound Economic Infrastructure.” Session moderator, Frank Proschan, a Southeast Asian scholar at IUB’s Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, helped redirect the focus from theory to application. Participants considered the problem areas identified earlier and suggested pragmatic solutions.

The final session of the day, “Conclusions and Recommendations,” was moderated by Jason Lewis, associate director of IU’s East Asian Studies Center. Discussions in this session helped to cull ideas for the most practical and beneficial educational programs.

Two of the most popular suggestions were for programs aimed at educating exiled Burmese in countries that border Burma, including a program for correspondence courses offered by U.S.-based universities, and work-study programs designed to assist refugee students in the United States.

IU presently administers the 1995-96 Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program on behalf of the United States Information Agency.

For more information about other IU/Burma-related activities, contact the Office of International Services at (812) 855-9086.

— Tom Aylward
Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program