The Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program at IU Bloomington

In 1990, the U.S. Congress mandated a program aimed at developing a cadre of Burmese leaders with the skills and knowledge to contribute to the eventual democratization of Burma (Myanmar). Out of this developed the Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program (BRSP) which, since 1995, has been administered by the International Research and Development unit (IRD) of Indiana University's Office of International Programs, through grants from the former U.S. Information Agency (now incorporated into the U.S. Department of State).

The program provides for the selection, pre-academic preparation, placement, and fellowship management of five to six students per year. Grantees are selected from Burmese refugees living mainly in India and Thailand who fled their homeland, fearing persecution by the ruling military junta for having participated in pro-democracy movements, and who have since demonstrated leadership skills among Burmese refugee organizations and communities abroad.

In August, the fifth group of BRSP students arrived to begin academic studies and training at the Bloomington campus. This year's group includes one woman and four men, all refugees who were living in India. They were welcomed to campus by International Programs Dean Patrick O'Meara, Associate Dean Charles Reafsnyster, and Associate Dean and Director of International Services Kenneth Rogers.

At IUB, they will participate in pre-academic orientation activities organized by IU's Center for International Educational and Development Assistance (CIEDA) and enroll in the Center for English Language Training. Upon completing these initial stages of the program, grantees begin full-time enrollment in degree programs at appropriate institutions in fields that are likely to assist them in their goal of contributing to the development of a democratic Burma.

In the five years since CIEDA has been administering the program, it has supported 27 Burmese refugees from India and Thailand. Six have already graduated and are in graduate school or have entered the workforce. Others are still continuing their studies in business, computer science, economics, education, engineering, international relations, journalism, law, political science, medicine, and social work. In addition to three IU campuses (Bloomington, Indianapolis, and Fort Wayne), they have attended other institutions such as Ball State University, Valparaiso University, University of Delaware, University of New Hampshire, Hartwick College, Santa Rosa Junior College, and San Francisco State College. Some of these schools have been able to commit additional support for these students' education. For example, Hartwick College in New York has given Hre Mang, who had already received a three-year B.A. from an institution in India, a two-year tuition scholarship to complete his studies in international relations.

Two of the graduates have managed to return to refugee camps in Thailand to work for short periods of time. All of them are active in organizations supporting the Burmese cause such as the All Burma Students League, the Karen Solidarity Organization, the Burma Youth Volunteer Association, and the Chin Human Rights Organization.

The Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program is expected to continue next year at IUB with the selection of five more Burmese refugees from India.

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