Alumni of IU’s Burmese Refugee Program Attend Workshop in Bloomington

For two days in July, 23 alumni from Indiana University’s Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program (BRSP) returned to the Bloomington campus, pledging to continue to work toward democratization in their home country, Burma (Myanmar), now under military rule for more than 10 years. Burmese students have been coming to IU for almost 10 years, supported by funds from the U.S. Information Agency (now the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the State Department), in collaboration with the Open Society Institute Burma Project, an affiliate of the Soros Foundation (see International News, October 2000). The general goal of the program is to prepare Burmese student leaders for a future transition to democracy in Burma.

At the reunion, many were meeting colleagues in other BRSP cohorts for the first time, sharing memories of harrowing experiences each had in fleeing their homeland, as well as planning together for the future. The two-day workshop included a number of different topics, including sessions on career planning, led jointly by Rendy Schrader of IU’s Career Development Center and Anwar Mohammed (BRSP ’98); on diversity, led by School of Education doctoral student Daisy Rodriguez, assisted by Hnem Bualteng (BRSP ’00); and on finances, led by Charles Bankart, formerly of the IU financial aid office (and now with the Office of International Programs).

The invited guest speaker for the reunion was Robert Quinn, director of the Scholars at Risk Network of the Human Rights Program at the University of Chicago. The network, whose mission is to defend academic freedom worldwide, arranges temporary academic positions at participating institutions for scholars who need sanctuary outside of their home regions. The network also acknowledges the central role of international students in an academic community, who often suffer risks similar to those of scholars.

The reunion’s final session, led by Associate Dean and Director of International Services Kenneth Rogers, was a free-ranging discussion of the personal and career challenges that Burmese students face living and studying abroad; the resources that are available, such as organizations, databases, networks, internships, etc.; the varying agendas of groups who support a democratic Burma; and the need for these participants to stay focused on developing a common blueprint for action in a future democratic Burma.

It has been encouraging for IU administrators involved with BRSP to see how far these students have progressed since they were first brought to IUB on preacademic training programs. All are now actively engaged pursuing degrees at various educational institutions in fields ranging from biology, computer science, information technology, international relations, and political science to business, engineering, journalism, law, and social work. At IUB, Myint Hlaing (’91), has already earned his Ph.D. in neurobiology and cellular biology and is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California–San Francisco, while Ngun (“Andrew”)...
The bottleneck to reconstruction and development of civil society in South Africa lies no longer at the level of policy but at the limited capacity to implement policy. Critical to the implementation of policy in South Africa is building partnerships between developing communities, higher education institutions, and the service sector (i.e., public, nongovernmental, and private).

During spring break, Robert Bringle, psychology professor and director of IUPUI's Center for Service and Learning (CSL) and Julie Hatcher, associate director of CSL, were part of a team of 10 service learning faculty sent from the United States to South Africa. They were there to consult on service learning curriculum development with the Community Higher Education Service Partnerships (CHESP) project that is housed at the Leadership Centre of the University of Natal.

While in South Africa, Bringle and Hatcher conducted workshops at the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein for participants from that university, as well as from Technikon Free State and the Qwa Qwa campus of the University of the North (in Phuthaditjhaba). The workshops focused on developing service learning classes and the scholarship of engagement. Each team working on a service learning class consisted of a faculty member, a service provider, and a resident of the community. The workshops were held in the community of Manguang, a traditionally black community outside Bloemfontein.

In addition, they consulted with UFS administrators on using community-based sites for student learning and teaching, research and service, and faculty development.

Prosper Mosime (center), construction coordinator for a Manguang-UFS community partnership program, shows off one of the handmade bricks being manufactured there to IUPUI's Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher.

Bringle also discussed the importance of service learning to curriculum development, institutional assessment, and broader institutional transformation. He plans to return there in February 2002 for further consultations.

—Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher
Center for Service Learning, IUPUI

Cung Lian ('97), having earned an LL.M. concentrating on human rights, is now pursuing the new Doctor of Juridical Science degree at the School of Law—Bloomington. Many remain active in NGO-work related to Burma and some have returned to the refugee camps in Thailand to work for short periods.

The alumni workshop was organized by IU's Center for the International Education and Development Assistance (CIEDA), through Associate Dean and Director Charles Reafsnyder and Assistant Director Kay Ikranagara, who administer the BRSP program.