IU Bloomington Hosts Open Society Institute’s First Burmese Alumni Workshop

For almost a decade, Indiana University Bloomington’s Center for International Education and Development Assistance (CIEDA) has administered a U.S. government supported program (see International News, October 2000) aimed at developing a small cadre of Burmese student leaders who will eventually return home to contribute to Burma’s democratization process.

Because of CIEDA’s well-regarded reputation for educational assistance to Burma, the Open Society Institute (OSI), which also supports a supplementary scholarship program for Burmese students, asked CIEDA to develop a workshop on the Bloomington campus that would bring alumni from the OSI program together for the first time. The highly competitive OSI scholarship program has been in existence since 1994.

In mid-November, 38 Burmese alumni gathered at IU’s workshop center in Bradford Woods to meet, exchange ideas, interact with expert speakers on topics of mutual concern, and develop meaningful networks. Official welcoming remarks were made by Patrick O’Meara, dean for international programs; Brian Winchester, director of the Center for the Study of Global Change; Kay Ikranagara, associate director of CIEDA; and Vera Johnson of OSI.

Tom Lodge, from the University of the Witwatersrand, started the workshop lectures, speaking to the group via interactive videoconference from Johannesburg, South Africa. He emphasized that the transition to democracy in South Africa started discreetly a decade or two before 1994 when most apartheid laws were rescinded and before Nelson Mandela and President de Klerk would contribute to the democratic efforts. He described the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that offered amnesty for anyone willing to come forward and speak publicly about their crimes, an absolute condition for the transition to democracy. The expansion of public education throughout the 1960s and 1970s also gave people a common language to speak about politics and democracy that was critical in creating understanding.

Edward Delaney, an attorney with Barnes and Thornburg in Indianapolis, gave a presentation on another part of the world that contrasted well with the South African experience. The history of the Balkans is complex with multiple ethnic and religious groups contributing to the formation of new national entities as part of the process of transition. Moreover, there was overwhelming international pressure and presence throughout the Balkans in the 1990s, and the creation of constitutions was done largely by the United Nations, the United States, and international agencies, with minimal local input. Seventy percent of the billions of foreign aid that poured into the Balkans during this period immediately flowed out in the form of expatriate staff salaries and outside contracts. Delaney asked, “Once you have international occupation, how do you get out of that situation?” He cautioned those Burmese who might be considering international intervention and occupation as an answer to a future democratic Burma to think twice about such a “solution.” Ko Zaw Oo from the Burma Fund and Ko Maung Maung Win of Moe Ma Ka Radio also gave short presentations.

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in the development of the Romanian Studies Program at Indiana University and became one of its staunchest supporters, always in the forefront of the battle to keep the program alive in critical times, for he was deeply convinced of its merits and usefulness.”

Just before his death, Spulber had the satisfaction of receiving copies of his final book, *Russia’s Economic Transitions: From Late Tsarism to the New Millennium*, which was published by Cambridge University Press in December 2003.

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On the second day, there was a panel discussion with four presenters. Robert Quinn discussed the role that scholars and writers play at critical times in a country’s development and the need to temporarily protect them by providing safe havens, so they can write freely about their views and opinions. Quinn is the director of the Scholars at Risk Network based at New York University, which has hosted two Burmese scholars in the past. He encouraged his listeners to suggest other Burmese intellectuals who might benefit from this program. Yuki Akimoto of the Bank Information Center addressed the very practical considerations of international financing of large dam projects. Peter Riggs of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund also monitors international financing and warned of a “gold rush” of donors when Burma eventually undergoes its transition to democracy. He emphasized the crucial role that the Burmese Parliament should play by taking control of international financing contracts and making strategic decisions about which projects, such as human resource projects, should be supported only by grant money (as opposed to loan money). Chris Merrill, director of the International Writers Program at the University of Iowa, spoke of the program’s work and encouraged the participation of more Burmese writers.

Concluding the workshop was Julie Sell of the *Economist* magazine, who led a lively group discussion summarizing the range of issues and actors involved in a transitional democracy and what lessons the Burmese participants should take with them from the workshop. To facilitate information sharing and networking among the OSI alumni, CIEDA has developed a Web site for the alumni. For further information, contact Carol Myint, program officer; telephone: (812) 855-3948; e-mail: cmyint@indiana.edu.

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abroad experience, I underwent something, felt something flow through me that, I think, transcends culture. It’s about living in this world. It’s about feeling small . . . about feeling young on old rocks on the other side of the world. I think that I figured out what “alive” meant that day and I finally felt connected to everything all around me. I felt like I could see the entire planet at once—and when you get down to it, that is about as potent as any “worldly” experience can get.