Students  Tuition  Police  Talks

Makerere strike blamed on drug abuse

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By Henry Sekanjako

Makerere University administration says drug abuse by some students fuelled the recent strike that rocked the university for close to a week.

According to management, investigations by the university have revealed that the strike was not caused by the purported 15% tuition fees increment, but rather influenced by students abusing drugs and external forces.

Speaking to journalists yesterday at the university, the acting vice-chancellor in charge of academic affairs, Umar Kakumba, said the strikes at Makerere have worsened of late as a result of students using drugs.

"The situation has been made worse by the rampant abuse of drugs by a section of the students. We have seen a change in behaviour of some students, due to the abuse of drugs," Kakumba said.

He said the Police and the military who took charge of the situation at the university found out that some students, especially those that were involved in the strike, were involved in drug abuse.

Fred Enanga, the Police spokesperson, yesterday at Central Police Station (CPS), told journalists that Polly Bandola, a former Makerere University student and chairperson Mitchell Hall, was arrested in possession of drugs and inflammables.

"Not all students are abusing drugs, there are just a few elements that are associated with drug abuse," Kakumba explained.

He added that the strike also involved external forces, such as discontinued and former students, that are affiliated to different political parties and organisations, which push students into going on strike.

Kakumba also said another factor that contributed to the strike were the political ambitions of some students, especially those aspiring to stand for guild leadership.

"External forces keep infiltrating and getting engaged in student politics, trying to propel these kinds of protests," Kakumba said.

Fees Increment

Last Wednesday, Makerere University students went on strike, protesting a 15% increment in tuition fees.

The students vowed to continue the strike, until the university administration rescinds the tuition increment policy.

If you ask the second-year students, they will tell you there has been no fees increment, because they are paying the same tuition until they complete their programmes," he said.

The university has previously argued that the current tuition regime is insufficient to run the institution and enable it to provide the quality of services required.

Yusuf Kiranda, the acting university secretary, said: "When the students are applying, they are aware of the fees structure. These fees are published alongside the programme when they are advertised. So, the university has not increased fees for any student. When you ask the students why they are striking, they say they are fighting for future generations."

According to Makerere administration, the tuition fees paid by students remain the lowest in the East African region.

Kakumba said, while Makerere University charges sh3.5m for the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery course per the academic year, the University of Nairobi charges sh17.5m, University of Dar es Salaam sh16m and sh18m for the University of Rwanda.

He defended the increment, that is expected to run for the next five years, saying: "The increment is to enable the university to continue with its services. Parliament gave us sh360b for the current financial year. Of this, sh166b, almost 50%, goes to the payment of salaries."

He noted that to be able to supplement government funding, the university has to internally generate funds for utility bills and research, among other areas.

Kakumba said, despite the protests against the 15% increment, 85% of the affected students had already paid their tuition fees.

Talks fail

Last evening, the university management and student leaders meeting to resolve the conflict ended in chaos after student leaders turned up.

However, earlier in the day, the student leaders issued a series of demands that they want the administration to effect before any engagement can be entertained.

The students demand the revocation of suspicious letters against their colleagues over the strike, revocation of the warning letters, exclusion of a vice-chancellor's personal assistant, Gordon Murray, and a senior administration official, Prof. Elias Hasabi, from the talks and involvement of the University Council in the talks.

With the situation calm, the students were yesterday going for their lectures. Security was, however, tight at the university's main gate, where students without identity cards were barred from accessing the institution.

However speaking to journalists yesterday, Julius Katerega, the guild president of Makerere University, dismissed allegations by the university administration that their strike was politically motivated. He also insisted they would continue with the strike, until the university had rescinded the 15% increment slapped on first-year students.