

The Comet

TO LIVE IN TRUTH IS TO SERVE

Murderers, not just cultists

IT is tragic that, over the years, most tertiary institutions in the country have become centres of mayhem rather than citadels of learning. The latest example in this disheartening development occurred at Olabisi-Onabanjo University (OOU), Ago-Iwoye, where a lecturer in the Department of English, Mr. Seun Oyedola, was found dead after having gone missing for nearly one week. His body was found in a bush close to campus, with machete wounds all over.

Oyedola disappeared after a clash between student cult groups at the Abusi-Edumare campus of OOU at Ijebu-Igbo about two weeks ago, the latest in an internecine confrontation between criminal groups on the campus, resulting in the deaths of some students. The university itself had only just recovered from a similar confrontation last year, which cost its students and members of the host community.

OOU's experiences are not unique. Nigeria's tertiary institutions are rife with gory tales of daylight killings, aggravated assault, rape and other acts of wanton violence perpetrated against students

before properly constituted courts of law. The current practice whereby accused students attend investigation panels set up by the higher institutions themselves, is open to manipulation and abuse.

Too often, the children of staff members and university officials themselves are rarely indicted by such panels; and even where individuals are found guilty, the most severe punishment meted out is that of rustication, a penalty which cannot prevent the students from seeking and gaining admission to institutions of higher learning elsewhere. The more student cultism is treated as the criminal offence that it is, the less attractive it is likely to be for those who indulge in it.

Part of the reason why the prevalence of student criminality in tertiary institutions has assumed the monstrous proportions that it has, is the inability of the authorities to properly monitor their students. In many universities, for instance, the student population is far in excess of

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other acts of wanton violence perpetrated against students and staff. In spite of the efforts of the President Olusegun Obasanjo administration and several state governors, the problem has refused to go away. Indeed, it appears to have taken on a life of its own, as these shadowy groups carry out their dastardly acts with ever-increasing contempt for the most basic rules of decency. Their tentacles have spread to secondary schools, as protracted battles among the criminal groups in towns like Port Harcourt and Ilorin demonstrate.

It should be pointed out from the onset, however, that it is extremely inaccurate to refer to these groups simply as cults because the term only refers to their clandestine nature and fails to reflect the exact nature of their methods and aims.

These so-called cults are criminal organisations engaged in acts of murder, assault, rape, armed robbery and other felonies; so, to consider them as anything else amounts to a misrepresentation and, by extension, a fatally incorrect diagnosis of a virulent social cancer. It is such distortion that makes it possible for students who commit murder to be handed over to the police and return to campus within a matter of days.

Students of tertiary institutions who commit murder are murderers, not mere cultists, and should be treated as such. It is in this regard that it is essential that the federal and state governments ensure that all individuals accused of involvement in the activities of these groups are arraigned

instance, the student population is far in excess of the institution's absorptive capacity.

Therefore, the National Universities Commission must accelerate the implementation of its teacher-student ratio measures and ensure that universities adhere to its recommendations reducing part-time students to no more than 10 per cent of their overall intakes for any session. The same should apply to other tertiary institutions.

The administrators need to be more accessible and sympathetic to the demands of students. Criminal groups often take advantage of the inevitable vacuum that develops when there is an adversarial relationship between the administrations of tertiary institutions and students.

It might be advisable to work out a nationwide code of conduct for all students, lecturers and administrators, which all would have to sign as a condition for admission or employment. Anyone who runs foul of it would be subject to previously agreed-upon sanctions. If everyone is subject to the same rules, cooperation between students, teachers and administrators might become that much easier.

Nigeria has passively witnessed the deviant activities of student criminals for far too long. It is time that the country develops the resoluteness and will power that are essential to stamping out the menace.