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DAILY TRUST

Nigeria: Cops Kill Students Amidst Protesting Colleagues

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For over four months, six tertiary institutions, owned by the Borno state government have remained closed.

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The closure was due to demands by both the academic and non-academic staff of the schools that government enhance their benefits by implementing the Consolidated Salary Structure of Nigerian Tertiary Institutions (CONTIS) approved by the federal government.

The institutions include Ramat Polytechnic, three Colleges of Education, the Borno College of Legal and Islamic Studies and the College of Agriculture, which four are located in Maiduguri, one each in Bama and Biu local government areas of the state.

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Before the strike, academic and non-academic staff under the auspices of Joint Unions of Tertiary Institutions (JUTI) differently made efforts towards convincing the Borno State government to implement the CONTIS. The discontent among the workers was that their counterparts in other states were enjoying the new salary whereas they were doing virtually the same work.

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On its part, the Borno state government said it cannot afford to implement the Consolidated Salary Structure of Tertiary Institutions (CONTIS) as demanded by the lecturers.

The state's commissioner for education, Mohammed Imam, said it will cost government N140 million monthly to implement CONTIS which he said was beyond the financial capability of the state government to handle.

Imam said already, over N900 million was being spent as monthly salaries for the striking lecturers, declaring that government could not neglect other sectors to meet their demands.

There were series of appeal by numerous individuals, private organisations and political groups over the persistent strike even as government and the striking lecturers remained hesitant to resolve the impasse.

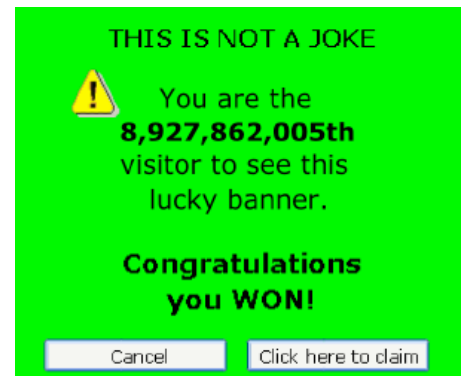
Given the situation, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), which appeared to blame the Borno state government for the lingering strike, not long ago, gave a two-week ultimatum to Borno governor, Ali Modu Sheriff, to work out modalities to end the four-month strike embarked upon by the academic and non-academic staff of the six tertiary institutions owned by the state which has kept students at home.

The association's president, Comrade Babanle Bashir, who led a team of NANS officials to Maiduguri, threatened that Sheriff should prepare for a showdown with Nigerian students from tertiary institutions across the country who will be mobilised to storm Maiduguri on February 4, should the six tertiary schools in the state remain closed due to the lingering strike.

The NANS president said the students have resolved to organise not only a protest but a movement which would stop government from doing anything in the same manner students have been denied education for more than a semester.

Bashir said NANS took a decision to stage the protest based on the conviction that the government has displayed clear signs of irresponsibility by showing laxity in handling the strike action. He said NANS has observed that while

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Borno is no exception to strike actions by lecturers, other governors have been more responsible by effectively managing the disagreements in their states as against the action of Sheriff.

The national president alleged that the "Borno State government has long been dribbling the students on several occasions, promising to resolve the plight of the lecturers but all turned out to be acceptive because the state promised that the schools would be reopened by 12th of January but didn't keep to its promise".

In fulfilment of their promise, Comrade Bashir gathered students on the appointed day in Maiduguri. Each carried placards with various inscriptions and converged at the gate of the Sharia Court of Appeal, a few metres away from Ramat Polytechnic along Maiduguri-Kano road where the demonstration was expected to take off.

As early as 9.00 am, Weekly Trust learnt that the students gathered and were addressed by Bashir who described as unacceptable, the lukewarm attitude expressed by the government in resolving the strike which has undermined the future of the students.

He said despite the two-week ultimatum given to the government to meet the demands of the striking teachers for normal academic activities to resume, government turned deaf ears, arguing that it lacks financial capability to implement the salary structure.

Bashir said government deliberately ignored the ultimatum they gave as well as the demand of the lecturers to government to implement CONTIS for lecturers of tertiary institutions.

While the students were being addressed by the NANS president, an Assistant Commissioner of Police, Mr. Abang Joseph, who led policemen deployed to the area, requested the students to shelve the demonstration. He warned that the security situation in the state does not warrant their demonstration against the government as negotiations were being conducted between the striking teachers and government.

The students however said they were tired of being dribbled by governor Ali Modu Sheriff, hence they began to move uniformly for what appeared to be a peaceful demonstration.

No sooner had they begun their march that the armed policemen started firing tear-gas at the students to disperse them. In the process, the policemen fired gun shots during which a Ramat Polytechnic, Maiduguri student, Mohammed Nur, was said to have been shot through one of his eyes by the cops. It was gathered that he had a scuffle with a cop who insisted that the deceased must surrender the placard he was carrying. The deceased student aged, 24, hails from Bayo local government Area of Borno state. He was a first year National Diploma (ND I) student of Marketing Department and was resident off-campus at Bulunkutu-Abuja, a suburb of Maiduguri.

It was further gathered that when the situation was brought under control, police took the remains of the late student to Umaru Shehu Specialist Hospital, Maiduguri, in a patrol vehicle where he was confirmed dead by doctors. The police also arrested the NANS president and other officials of the association and detained them at the Metropolitan police division

Angered by the death of Nur and the arrest of their colleagues, the students mobilised themselves and regrouped, set tyres ablaze and barricaded the road for about ten minutes before they were dispersed by anti-riot policemen backed by armoured personnel vehicles.

By evening of that day, the remains of the late student was buried according to Islamic rites while more policemen were deployed to Ramat Polytechnic and other locations in Maiduguri.

When contacted on telephone, the state's Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) ASP Bilyaminu Bello, said he could not comment on the issue because he was yet to be briefed.

Some residents have blamed the state government for failing to contain the crisis. It was gathered from sources that over 10 security reports had been passed to governor Sheriff regarding dangers the ongoing strike pose to the state, because the students were worried especially with their open threat to stage a demonstration last Wednesday. It was gathered that government ignored the threat for 13 days and only invited the students while they were making 'good' their threat.

To worsen matters, while the students' national and state leaders presented themselves, Weekly Trust gathered that governor Sheriff, whom the students wanted to meet since he alone could make realistic commitments on behalf of the state, left his deputy, Adamu Dibal, whom many believe has no authority to approve as little as N100,

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000 from the state coffers to handle the situation. It was further learnt that during a meeting between the NANS' officials and the deputy governor, the NANS' president allegedly went harsh on governor Sheriff saying the governor was not being sincere. His remarks, it was said, angered the deputy governor who was said to have walked the president out of the negotiating room: a development that reportedly stalled discussions between government and the students.

It was partly for this that the students went ahead with the planned protest which unfortunately resulted in the death of one of them. Despite the death of their colleague, the students are said to have threatened another demonstration next Monday should government fail to dialogue with the lecturers to end the on-going strike.

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