

Two die, UNIPORT shut as students protest fee payment

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TWO students of the University of Port Harcourt were on Monday feared killed during a protest over an alleged policy by the management of the institution that school fees must be paid before they would be allowed to take their first semester examinations.

One of the students identified as Peter Ofurun, who was said to have been hit by a bullet from a policeman, died instantly.

Another student also hit by a bullet was rushed to the hospital, even as sources claimed that she died on the way to the hospital.

The UNIPORT students' protest had halted academic and administrative activities in the institution as they demanded that the Vice Chancellor, Prof. Sunday Lale,

should address them and reverse the policy

Ofurun was a student in the Faculty of Management Science before he met his untimely death. His corpse was later taken to the African Independent Television station in Port Harcourt.

Sources told our correspondents that the two students were hit by the bullets when policemen opened fire to disperse the protesting students from the busy East-West road they had occupied for hours.

However, the state Police Public Officer, Mr. Ahmad Muhammad, told one of our correspondents that no life was lost during the protest.

“No reported case of loss of life throughout the students’ protest. What the police did was just the discharge of their mandate of restoring normalcy and orderliness in the university,” Muhammad said.

The students’ presence on the East-West Road had caused a gridlock as travellers waited in vain for the students to disperse for them to continue with their journey.

An armoured personnel carrier that was moving close to the institution to ensure that calm returned was also trapped in the traffic.

It was gathered that the students had come out from their hostels at about 4.30am to express their grievances over the stance of the UNIPORT management to stop them from taking their first semester examinations because of non-payment of the fees.

It was gathered that the UNIPORT management had designed a policy that stopped students, who had yet to pay their school fees, from taking their exams.

Affected students, according to a source, will also be made to carry over the courses.

But the protesting students described the policy as a form of victimisation, adding that the dwindling economy of the nation was affecting them as they were unable to pay their fees immediately.

One of the placards of the protesting students read, 'Say No to No School Fees, No Examinations.'

"We have pleaded with the management of our school on several occasions to extend the deadline for the payment of the school fees to second semester, but they refused.

"We will prefer the school to be shut down until the management accepts our position on this matter. We are going to continue with our protest until the vice-chancellor comes down here to address us," one of the leaders of the protesters said.

Another protester, the President, Edo State Students in UNIPORT, Mr. Andrew Orose, said, "...We are doing this because of the economic meltdown, which the country is into. There are students whose parents just lost their jobs. There are those whose parents have not been paid salaries for months by the government. How would they be able to pay? We know the nature of our economy now; how would students meet up to pay?

"Most of the lecturers in the senate that are making this policy did not go to school with their own money. They did not come from rich background, but they have all forgotten their root. They want the students to pay by fire by force."

Reacting, the Deputy Registrar, Information of UNIPORT, Dr. William Wodi, explained that the protest was not about increase in fees, but about a few students, who wanted to take exams without paying the N45,000 school fee.

Wodi said that while 98 per cent of students had paid and ready to sit for the exams, the two per cent remaining refused to pay, even after extending the deadline on five occasions.

Maintaining that the fee was not new to the students, Wodi added that the immediate past administration had directed that no university should charge beyond N45,000 as fee.

The UNIPORT spokesman, who said the first semester examination for the 2015/2016 academic session would no longer begin on Monday (yesterday) as scheduled, warned that those who failed to pay their fees would carry their courses over.

“We have continued to extend the deadline for the payment of the fees. The deadline was first moved from February 12, 2016 to March 11 and to March 30.

“We moved it again from March 30 to April 5th and now to April 7th and we said we are no longer moving it further. But they are saying that the economy is hard,” he said.

“...We are not expelling students; we are only saying that those who fail to pay will not be part of the exam and they are carrying the course over,” he added.

Meanwhile, the Senate of the university has shut down the institution with immediate effect.

Wodi, who made this announcement through a text message sent to one of our correspondents on Monday said, “Senate has shut down the university with immediate effect.

“All students have been directed to vacate their hostel accommodation before 6pm today (Monday). Students’ union and all their affiliate bodies have been suspended with immediate effect. The closure will last for one month.”