

UNICAL's Pound of Flesh

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Authorities of the University of Calabar wield the big stick against students of the institution for taking part in a riot last August, resulting in the damage of properties worth millions of Naira

Students of the University of Calabar, who were sent home, August 27, following a two-day rampage in which property worth millions of naira were destroyed will remain at home till January 6, 2012. The university authorities has insisted that that each student would pay N10, 000 to the school authorities for damages before they can resume. They are also to swear an affidavit to be of good behaviour during their remaining period in the institution. Their guardians would also swear to an affidavit that their wards would be of good behaviour. However, the idea of paying of N10, 000 fine has not gone down well with the students, their parents and some members of the university community. They said the money would amount to hundreds of millions of naira and far more than the worth of the damaged items considering the high student population. There are nine halls of residents in the university with some of them harbouring up to 5, 000 students. A large number of the students also live off campus. The January deadline is also said to be too far as it would render them idle for too long a time. The fine was recommended by the committee the university management set up to investigate the riot, which took place on August 26 and 27, and was said to have been triggered by gunmen, who invaded the students's hostels. The gunmen were said to have robbed the students of their money, GSM handsets and shot one of them who later died in hospital. The committee, headed by Andrew Uduigwomen, dean of the Faculty of Arts, was to also establish the extent of the damage to university and staff property, identify the culprits and recommend appropriate punishment for those found guilty. It gave December 15 as deadline for payment of the fine, failing which the defaulting students would cease to be students of the institution. The university campus has since been out of bounds to the students who have been busy paying the fine through some selected banks. The online payment is made at Oceanic Bank, Zenith Bank, Wema Bank, United Bank for Africa, UBA, and Sterling Bank. The school authorities had earlier fixed the resumption date for October 24, but later shifted it to January next year. Newswatch spoke with some of those protesting the fine. "How can the university management ask each student to pay N10, 000 for damages? I'm sure it would collect well over N400 million at the end of the day. Are the damaged properties worth that amount? Why does the management want to use the riot to milk parents dry?", asked a university staff who did not want his name in print. Effiong Eyo, spokesman for the university, told Newswatch that the shift in resumption date was informed by the need for the authorities to complete repair and renovation of destroyed buildings and other structure and fix damaged vehicles. "As you can see, we have completed repair of destroyed sections of this building, especially the main administrative block, which houses the office of Professor James Epoke, the vice- chancellor." There are many other vandalised buildings to renovate. They include the ICT building, where lots of computer sets were destroyed, the UNICAL Microfinance Bank, UNICAL Pharmacy, the Transport Section office and the Samuel Imoke Medical Centre. Also to be replaced are university buses which were vandalised by the rampaging students. They were seen lying idle in front of the Students Affairs unit. The students had reportedly invaded residents of their teachers and destroyed 62 of their cars. Some of the students had protested the compulsory fine saying they did not take part in the riot. These include female students in halls of residence and those living off campus. The female students said it was an all-male-affair. The off campus students argue that they did not know there was riot on campus until after it was over. Eyo said it was not possible to exempt any student from paying the fine. "There is nothing those complaining about the fine can do. The university said every of its students should pay it. It does not matter whether you are female or you live off-campus. You pay the money once you are a student of UNICAL," Eyo told Newswatch. But Simeon Ebenezer Simeon, a resident of Calabar and father of one of the students, said he was not bothered by the N10, 000 fee because he had become used to paying one type of fees, levy or another to the institution in the course of his ward's sojourn in the institution. It was not possible for Newswatch to speak with Epoke, who was said to have been heading a committee that was interviewing candidates for the position of chief security officer of the institution. The job of the acting chief security officer of the institution, who was awaiting promotion was said to be on the line following his poor handling of the riot. Many former students of UNICAL have expressed concern over the riot. "We expect to see a recommendation that will support the purging of non-academic students. It is a known fact that many people inhabiting various academic campuses are not students and therefore use the cover of student for all sorts of nefarious activities," Nosa Omaragbon, public relations officer of UNICAL alumnus association, said.