

Kenya: School fire kills at least 59 students

By David Rowan
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At 1.40am on March 26, fire swept through a dormitory of the Kyanguli Secondary School in Machakos, 30 miles (65 km) to the southeast of the Kenyan capital Nairobi, killing at least 59 male students between the ages of 15 and 19.

The official death toll is still unclear, as 10 students remain missing and there is confusion regarding the number of students that were in the building. Up to 28 students were admitted to hospital, some in a critical condition with burns covering 60 percent of their bodies. Most of the deaths were caused either by carbon monoxide inhalation, or by the collapse of the roof of the single storey building.

The cause of the fire has still not been established. But the Kenyan press are circulating rumours that the fire may have been deliberately started. A number of reports have raised the possibility of an arson attack by students unhappy with the annulling of final year exam results due to accusations of cheating, or to disputes over the mishandling of school funds and discontent over poor food and accommodation. A sixteen year-old survivor of the fire, Musango Mulunzi, told reporters that there was a strong smell of petrol the night before the fire. He said: "The air around the two dormitories was filled with a petrol smell. We promptly reported the matter to the administration".

The tragedy has again brought to light the terrible living conditions of Kenyan students and the disregard of the government and its institutions for their safety. In 1998 at least 25 female students died in Bombolulu, near Mombasa, when their dormitory caught fire while they were locked inside.

The Kyanguli boarding school is government run and has up to 600 students. All of those who died were in a poorly maintained and overcrowded barracks style dormitory. The dormitory housed over 130 students, but was designed to hold half that number. One of the two doors to the dormitory was locked on the outside

and all of its ten windows were barred. There were no fire extinguishers.

Reports indicate that it is common practice to lock students inside dormitories at night. The Red Cross coordinator at the school, Vera Makuti, said, "If the building had big doors and windows without grills, I believe many boys would have escaped the fire before the roof fell in".

For many parents in Kenya sending their children to government-run boarding schools is seen as a way of providing a decent education and a means of escape from the grinding poverty associated with day to day living in Kenya. The father of a 15 year-old boy injured in the Kyanguli fire explained that he sent his son there to improve his education and to attempt to keep him out of trouble. He continued "We don't have electricity in many homes and sometimes we lack kerosene for lamps for them to study... why not keep them in boarding if I can afford it?"

Kenya has about 3,500 government boarding schools, although up to 987 of them are run by the Roman Catholic church. The majority of these schools have a military-style approach, basing their education programmes around "character building". Most of the schools are starved of resources and have rudimentary facilities. The students have to study in overcrowded classrooms and live in overcrowded dormitories in a country where water and electricity are rationed.

A years schooling and board at Kyanguli Secondary School costs \$260 dollars, compared to the privately run boarding schools that have computers and well-furnished science labs where the cost is \$5,000 per year.

The day after the fire the parents of students presumed dead waited for 12 hours, only to be informed by the school administration and the police that they were unable to offer a complete list of those who were dead or missing. Parents directed their anger towards

the local Education Authority, which refused to answer their questions and failed to even appoint a spokesperson.

The government has proposed to convene a commission of inquiry. Whether the immediate cause of the fire is discovered or not, there is unlikely to be any criticism of the policy of locking students into dormitories, the overcrowded conditions, dilapidated buildings or the broader questions of poverty and its effect on education. A commission of inquiry was set up to investigate the 1998 fire in Bombolulu and its only findings were that the fire was “probably” caused by an electrical fault. No criticism was made of the students being imprisoned in their dormitory, or any investigation of the broader social devastation that lies behind such disasters.

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