

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
ON
COPPERBELT UNIVERSITY CLOSURE
BY
THE HON. MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, PROF. LUO, MP

Mr Speaker, let me take this very rare opportunity to render a ministerial statement on the closure of the Copperbelt University (CBU). I shall endeavor to inform this House what caused the closure of CBU and what has protracted the reopening of the University.

Sir, it is very important that I give a brief background and the sequence of events that occurred with regard to this matter. This is in order to refresh the memories of this august House and the nation at large, in case people have forgotten.

Mr Speaker, the university was to conduct early sessional examinations from 1st April to 5th April, 2019. There was a group of students who had failed their continuous assessments and demanded that despite failing their exams they be allowed to write the sessional examinations. This is against the university senate regulations that stipulate that a student had to have obtained at least 50 per cent pass of their continuous assessment before they could write examinations.

Sir, from the onset, let me inform this august House that in the week preceding the riots, CBU management had engaged the student leadership and informed them that the decision relating to continuous assessment and examinations was a preserve of the senate, to which students are represented and are party to. As such, any decision to address the demand could only be reversed and be considered by senate. The students were further informed that this provision is a standard procedure for all universities all over the world, and reversing it would compromise the quality of education and lower the status of the university.

Mr Speaker, further, the Vice-Chancellor had met student leaders prior to the protests to explain the importance of writing exams and following university regulations. This was after having received information that the students had called for a class boycott and put in place a black

Monday protest where they would all dress in black. The student actually attempted to sit for exams after discussions with the Vice-Chancellor, but upon being informed of the outcome of the discussions with the university management, they blocked entry to examination rooms. After some commotion, the student's leadership called for a meeting in the multi-purpose hall where the bulk of the examinations were taking place, thereby disrupting the whole examination set-up. Soon afterwards, they gathered at the monk square where they later decided to trek to the Jambo Drive Campus and a riot ensued after a confrontation with the Zambia Police who had already gathered by the main gate. The students rioted and damaged the cafeteria, and looted all the supplies that were in the cafeteria and the nearby shop.

Mr Speaker, it should be noted that the procedure for holding meetings was not followed, therefore, the students gathered illegally. Following this riot, the students demanded for a meeting with CBU Vice-Chancellor and also called me as Minister of Higher Education for a meeting. I agreed to meet the students on Wednesday 5th April, 2019 as I was working on the Copperbelt. Following their meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, the students agreed to proceed to write exams unconditionally. They dropped the boycott idea and the first examinations took place the following morning of Monday 1st April, 2019.

In the afternoon, the students called for a boycott and started blocking the entrance to the examination hall. They also continued with violent protests. Since His Excellency the President of this Republic, Mr Edgar Chagwa Lungu was on duty in Kitwe on Tuesday, 2nd April, 2019, the student representatives requested for a meeting with him. During this meeting, the student representatives apologised for their riotous behaviour which led to the damage of the cafeteria and looting of cafeteria provisions. They assured His Excellency the President of this Republic, Mr Edgar Chagwa Lungu that this kind of behaviour would not repeat itself.

Mr Speaker, since these students had a scheduled appointment with me the following day, 3rd April, 2019, His Excellency the President referred them to me for further discussions. The student leaders assured him that their concerns would be resolved on a round table. Despite the assurances to the Head of State, His Excellency, Mr Edgar Chagwa Lungu, on 3rd April, 2019, the students escalated the riots resulting in extensive damage to the school infrastructure and

innocent people's property. They broke the office of the Dean of Mines, the Vice-Chancellor's office, the Council office, the Academic office and the lecture rooms of the School of Built Environment and the School of Mines and Mineral Sciences.

Mr Speaker, during that period, I was at Sherbourne Hotel waiting for the students for an appointment. So, instead of coming for the appointment, they chose to go and damage more property. The next plan these students had was to go and burn the multi-purpose facility, which was being used for examinations and meetings. This riot, which occurred on Wednesday, 3rd April, 2019, where the students extensively damaged property, was very unfortunate because we had an agreed meeting at Sherbourne Hotel.

Sir, as I sat there from 1900 hours to 2100 hours waiting for them, only to receive a phone call informing me that the students had rioted and damaged school property. I asked the police to keep vigil so that no further damage was caused to property. On 4th April, 2019, I visited the university to assess the situation on campus, in the company of senior management staff, security wings and senior staff from the Ministry of Higher Education. During my visit, the students continued to exhibit unruly behaviour and shouted that they wanted the university closed. I also had an opportunity to see the extensive damage that had been caused to the university property. As I had earlier indicated, the lecture theatres of the School of Built Environment and the School of Mines and Mineral Sciences, the office of the Dean of Mines, the Vice-Chancellor's office, the Counsel Office and the Academic Office were extensively damaged.

Following the visit to the university, I held consultations with our security wing which advised that should the university continue to be open, it would risk both the public and private infrastructure. We were also told that it would lead to possible loss of lives. This left the Government with no option but to close down the university on 5th April, 2019 to secure the safety of innocent lives and property. Consequently, I announced the closure of the Copperbelt University (CBU).

Mr Speaker, let me remind this august House that when a similar riot happened at the University of Zambia (UNZA), we lost a life. Those who were there, were not blamed for that loss of life

but the Government and I, in particular. It is clear that apart from the invisible hand, the riots are exacerbated by lack of adequate security in our public institutions, in this case, CBU campus. This is evident in the porous nature of the campus grounds, student hostels, lecture theatres and several other places within the university. It has been noted by my ministry that during the riot, these places are accessible to both students and outsiders, and this poses a danger to everybody including the campus property. While I was on campus, I saw children run for their lives to go and hide in the nearby bushes as the unruly students ran amok chanting slogans of: "Close the University". Unfortunately, since the university is so accessible to outside elements who could also be contributing to the riots, I feared for the lives of these young children.

Sir, in order to avert the unfortunate circumstance that happened at UNZA where we lost an innocent soul and on the advice of the security wings, the ministry saw it fit to close this institution until such a time that the security situation at the campus was improved and the damaged property was replaced to ensure a conducive learning environment.

Mr Speaker, in this regard, the Ministry of Higher Education has been working closely with the university management to ensure that the damaged property and infrastructure is repaired and security measures are put in place before reopening the university.

Sir, I wish to report that considerable progress has been recorded. To this effect, I will be announcing the date of reopening the university in due course. I want to repeat this for the sake of the lies that are on social media. I wish to report that considerable progress has been recorded, and I will only announce the date of reopening CBU in due course. However, as a prerequisite to opening CBU, the Ministry of Higher Education is working at enhancing security in a phased approach. So far, the following things need to be done:

- (a) installation of the Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) covering areas within and the outside perimeter of the campus;
- (b) creation of a perimeter fence with restriction access points in and out of the university;

- (c) introduction of access cards for students and staff to control access to facilities such as the university campus, libraries and hostels.

Mr Speaker, so far, we have done a lot of extensive work such as:

- (a) repairing and strengthening of the perimeter wall fence;
- (b) initial works for the provision of electronic access control at the three main gates;
- (c) clustering of student residence to provide palisade fencing and electronic unity for hostel entry for hostels;
- (d) clustering of learning spaces such as the administration block, library and the multi-purpose facility for similar access control (electronic); and
- (e) improved lighting within the university.

Sir, further, a due diligence study involving our security wings has been completed and at the moment, reputable companies that can implement these security measures have been identified and a short list has been prepared. A call for proposals will be done. The cost of implementing this project has been determined.

Mr Speaker, in this regard, we have engaged our colleagues at the Ministry of Finance to make these resources available and an initial K10 million has been approved for disbursement by the Ministry of Finance. Once these security measures have been implemented at CBU, we shall embark on similar security measures at UNZA and eventually roll-out the same to all public universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Sir, as a deterrent for students, and to mitigate the costs of repairing the damaged property, the university has been allowed to surcharge all students upon return to the university when it

reopens. The university has gone further to institute disciplinary measures against students that were found to have been responsible for the unrest. Further, student counselling and other welfare programmes will be instituted upon the return of the students.

Mr Speaker, as a nation, we are concerned that despite the Government, parents and guardians sparing no effort or expense in ensuring that students are in school, they continue to exhibit irresponsible tendencies that result in university closures.

Sir, I believe that no amount of anger should ever drive students to riot and damage private property and university infrastructure, which the nation sacrifices for by foregoing other social amenities. The Government shall not spare any student, member of staff or member of the public involved in instigating riotous behaviour in our institutions of higher learning.

Mr Speaker, having said so, I wish to assure this august House and the nation at large, that it is not the government's intention and desire to close any institution of higher learning considering the high premium that the PF Government has placed on education. This is evident in the continued huge development and investment in terms in development of infrastructure, purchase of equipment, curriculum reviews and training and recruitment of students and staff.

Sir, let me also ask parents to spend time with their children and counsel them about the importance of focusing on education while in university or any institution of higher learning and not to engage in politics.

Mr Speaker, education is the equaliser between the poor and the rich, the privileged and the under privileged, the tall and the short. This is one area where we should all come together and ensure that we take politics out of our university.

Sir, let me conclude by saying to the nation that politics must stay out of education. It is one topic that should bring us, whether in the Opposition or in the Government, together and protect the education sector of our country.

Mr Speaker, I thank you.