

Ugandan College Seeks To Rebuild

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KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) -- On a hill a local king called Makerere -- "cradle of the infant sun" -- the British built one of black Africa's most famous universities.

Some of east and central Africa's best minds were formed at Makerere University during nearly a half century -- leaders in politics, business, the arts, medicine.

Then Idi Amin imposed his brutal dictatorship, and like much of Uganda, the school withered. During the 1970s, hardly a building was constructed or repaired. Foreign professors were expelled. The medical school lost crucial British accreditation.

But, 20 years after Amin's ouster, Makerere has clawed its way back. The number of students has quadrupled. Instructor salaries are way up. Library shelves have been restocked.

"The education offered here is the best anywhere," said Charles Otai, a Ugandan in his second year as a political science major.

To many Africans, Makerere still has a reputation that Ugandan poet Susan N. Kiguli described as "a river of knowledge" at a recent celebration marking the university's 75th birthday.

But Vice Chancellor Pancras J.M. Ssebuwufu isn't thumping his chest, even though Makerere attracts more applicants from Uganda and neighboring countries than it can admit.

He remembers when Amin seized power in 1971, expelling all Asians -- as people with ancestry in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are referred to here -- and terrorized other foreigners.

"It was a big setback and the beginning of our nose dive," said Ssebuwufu, who as a senior had to teach lower-level classes.

Neglect is still evident. Walls and floors of many buildings are cracked and paint has peeled off. Lecture hall benches sag and equipment is old.

Founded in 1921 as a technical school with 14 boys and five instructors, Makerere became a college of the University of London in 1949 and in 1963 the nucleus of the short-lived University of East Africa.

Only Fort Hare University in South Africa and Achimota College in Ghana rivaled Makerere

<http://www.ugadamission.net/aboutug/articles/makerere.html>[4/29/2011 10:51:44 AM]

Makerere in excellence among the institutions of higher learning that admitted blacks before most African countries gained independence in the 1960s.

Retired Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere and Uganda's President Milton Obote, who was toppled by Amin, are both former students. So is Bethuel Gecaga, who managed British American Tobacco Co. -- one of the largest businesses in East Africa -- for more than two decades.

Makerere also produced some of the region's major literary figures, including Kenya's Ngugi was Thiong'o and Ugandan Taban Lo Liyong.

"It was a very intellectually stimulating place," said Anyang Nyong'o, a Kenyan legislator and graduate of Makerere.

The university suffered a severe blow in 1978 when its pride and joy, its medical school, lost recognition from Britain's General Medical Council. It did not regain accreditation until 1986.

Makerere's rehabilitation began with a conference of national and university

officials in 1987. The school estimated it would cost \$130 million to get Makerere back on its feet.

Donors, including several European nations, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, put up \$38 million. The World Bank extended a \$200 million loan.

Other assistance followed. Basic repairs on the university's oldest buildings have been completed, and new structures are being built.

Postgraduate studies -- abandoned during Amin's rule -- have resumed and morale is high among instructors, whose salaries have risen from an average of \$140 a month to \$1,060, Ssebuwufu said.

The student body has risen from 5,000 to 20,000, with the majority of students paying their own tuition. Annual fees range from \$600 for a bachelor of arts degree to \$1,400 for a degree in medicine.

With Uganda's government starved for cash, the state-owned Makerere has found ways to raise its own money -- running a bakery, a printing press and a hotel.

"Given the current trend," Ssebuwufu said, "we will be as good as any other university in five years."

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