

# At a University in Congo, Lessons Are Hard-Learned

Some Students, Professors Remain Despite Chaos of War

By Emily Wax

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BUNIA, Congo -- More than anything else, Charles Cwinyaay was determined to remain a university student. So during this town's most recent gun battles, he sat in his room and by the glow of a naked light bulb continued to read his fraying copy of James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," the impassioned plea for an end to racial discrimination in 1960s America.

On a tiny cot in a musty dormitory where the paint is chipped down to the bumpy concrete and bathrooms are mud-floored, Cwinyaay made a promise to himself as bullets crisscrossed the campus on a Saturday afternoon earlier this month. No matter how bad the fighting became, he would stick with his studying. He would not flee.

He did not, but then the militiamen who roam this town came and looted the university. They stole Cwinyaay's radio, his clothes, his bedsheets and, worst of all, his books.

"They took my Langston Hughes, my Shakespeare, my Emily Dickinson," said the English major, as a group of fellow students in this French- and Swahili-speaking region of northeast Congo listened to his story and nodded. "So now all I have left is the one notebook I had with me. I will just sit here and read. I won't give in."

Shot at in their classrooms, robbed in their dorms, students and teachers at the Institut Supérieur Pédagogique somehow keep to their studies in a school built by the U.S. government in 1970 as a gift to Africa.

Since the war began five years ago, classes have been canceled more than 30 times. The school's two computers have been stolen and the cafeteria and health center closed down, their windows and furniture riddled with bullet holes. In fighting last month, four professors were killed, more than half of the student body fled and the radio station was taken over by an ever-changing cast of rebel groups, people here say.

"Does the world care about Congo?" said the school's senior administrator, Raymond Mandro Kalongo, who came here as a history teacher 27 years ago. "We really want to believe they do. We need so much help, but we can't wait. We have to carry on."

There is cautious hope that the recent arrival of French-led multinational peacekeepers will restore order to Bunia and the outlying Ituri region, where the central government has ceded control to a variety of ethnic militia and rebel groups backed by neighboring Rwanda and Uganda.

But until then, the school is left with little more than its pride in the midst of a five-year war in which about 3.3 million people have probably died from fighting and disease, according to the International Rescue Committee, a refugee aid group.

The university is a series of low-lying and connected buildings in the hills above Bunia. The dorms are four stories high. There are chemistry labs and wings for math, languages and literature. In peaceful times, it could look like a community college in small-town America, with its long fields of rolling grass and basketball court.

The Belgian colonial rulers who went home in 1960, people here say, discouraged Congolese from attending college, though most valued education highly. So when the U.S. Agency for International Development completed the school in 1970 as part of a program to train a national corps of African teachers, people celebrated.

"We had a beautiful opening day ceremony, with Congolese music and food," recalled Kalongo, who sat at a desk with only his patched-together datebook, in which he tries to record every gunshot. "This place was an example of what a strong, well-educated country ordinary Congolese wanted to become."

But the school soon fell on hard times. During the 1980s, under dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, a U.S. ally, school funds often disappeared into the pockets of Mobutu and his allies, people here say. Students were left without new books, chemicals for chemistry class, paper or even food. The university closed the cafeteria, where three meals a day of beans, potatoes, rice and fish used to be served. After the war began, the capital stopped funding the school altogether.

Today only about 100 students remain in a facility intended for 700. They are taught by about a dozen professors. The school limps along with the \$180 in annual fees charged to each student. Students help out their teachers by paying small fees, about 60 cents, for each session in the classroom. Officially, classes have been canceled since March because of the fighting, but students don't accept that, and they continue to show up. Teachers ask for things like pencils and notebooks the way Western educators ask for tenure.

Yet at times, the scene on the campus here is reassuringly normal.

Edward Dhelo-Dhena, an English professor, glides by on his bicycle. He wears a straw hat and plaid shirt. He looks as if he could teach at any college in the United States. But he was educated in the capital, Kinshasa, and had never spoken with a native speaker of English.

"Hi, John," he says, addressing a student who is practicing English from a textbook and pronouncing every letter.

"Hello, sir," answers the student, John Kabaseke, one of Dhelo-Dhena's favorites, bowing in respect.

The 52-year-old professor takes off his thick glasses and asks how Kabaseke is doing. He has heard that bullets whizzed through Kabaseke's room recently, shredding his only suit jacket, which he wore to look like a professional.

"It's still okay," Kabaseke says with a shrug.

Kabaseke and his professor sit and talk about the war and about how peace will come. Then they talk about Kabaseke's career goals. "My appetite is to be a writer," the student says. Then he lists his favorites: Emily Dickinson. "Her ideas, oh, they are wonderful," he tells his smiling professor. William Faulkner. "He understood sadness," Kabaseke says. To that his professor nods.

But it is William Shakespeare whom he finds the most outstanding. He jokes with his teacher about favorite lines, sonnets and plots, and then states that his favorite quote is from "The Taming of the Shrew."

He poses theatrically, looking out over the landscape, then utters one of the play's most famous lines: "I will be free, even to the uttermost, as I please, in words."

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