

## Kenya: Deadly stampede in school highlights dangers of overcrowding and poor infrastructure

February 12, 2020

On 3 February, a stampede in the Kakamega Primary School in Kenya's western region left 14 students dead and 40 severely injured. Kenyan education unions have reacted angrily to the factors that led to the tragedy. The unions condemned the lack of implementation of existing safety standards, and addressed the critical issue of overcrowding in the country's schools.

### A national tragedy

The stampede happened as students were leaving school. While the cause of the panic is not clear, the school's very narrow staircase from the third floor severely worsened the situation. The students stumbled and fell as they were trying to run out, with many dying of suffocation. There were also reports that some fell from the third floor of the building.

### Investigation

An investigation by the security agencies is now underway, and the school has been closed until 10 February to allow the investigators to do their work. Kenya's Deputy President, William Ruto, and Education Minister George Magoha were among the officials who visited the school on 4 February.



This incident raises questions about the safety of children in Kenya's schools. In September last year, eight pupils died and 69 were injured when a classroom collapsed at a primary school in Nairobi. One of the issues that emerged at the time was overcrowding in schools, due to a rising demand for education, especially since free primary school education was introduced by the government in 2003. Even if overcrowding may not have been an issue in this latest tragedy, it remains an issue in many Kenyan schools.

### **KNUT: Need for quality school infrastructure, and regular inspection by public authorities**

Tragedies like the one in Kakamega, "have become common phenomena in Kenyan schools largely due to overcrowding, poorly constructed infrastructure in schools, and inadequate numbers on duty to man the institution", said Wilson Sossion, General Secretary of the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT).

"As a union, we believe in the principle of quality safe learning environments with infrastructures certified by the State Department of Public Works, State Department of Public Health, and the State Department of Basic Education, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Act 2007," Sossion added.

However, the infrastructure in many public schools/colleges and learning environments has not been approved by the state departments. In addition, there is a lack of regular inspection by the Directorate of

Quality Assurance and Standards. This is a serious breach of law and risky for learners.

“We urge the Ministry of Education to take urgent action to end these disasters in schools,” Sossion concluded.

### **KUPPET: Call for ministerial action**

The National Executive Board of the Kenya Union of Post Primary Education Teachers (KUPPET) visited the Kakamega Primary School on 5 January. Led by National President Omboko Milemba, Secretary General Akelo Misor, and National Treasurer Wicks Mwethi Njenga, union officials met with the school administrators, local security officials, and parents to establish the chain of events that led to the unfortunate deaths, and to explore effective preventive measures.

Since the death of eight pupils after a classroom collapsed in Nairobi, in September 2019, the education union has been engaged in initiatives to improve the safety of learners and teachers in schools and to prevent disasters such as the one that unfolded in Kakamega. KUPPET is pressing for strict enforcement of the 2008 Safety Standards Manual for Schools in Kenya, which is the main policy document governing school safety in the country.

### **Massive congestion**

Research findings indicate that non-enforcement of the existing safety policy standards has left schools vulnerable to basic safety hazards. The findings emerged in a study that KUPPET commissioned on the state of school safety in Kenya in 2019. It highlighted massive congestion in public schools, the reenrolment of students without regard for their safety and security, and the lack of awareness by school committees of existing safety standards. The study’s findings were shared with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Professor George Magoha.

“How many more Kenyan children must die for the Cabinet Secretary to create a stakeholder body to review and harmonise all policy instruments and guidelines relating to safety, security and disaster management in the education sector?” Misor asked.

“Following the disaster in Nairobi, we made an urgent appeal to the minister to establish a coordinated operational and referral mechanism for public awareness, capacity enhancement and response during incidences of insecurity and disaster in schools. No such thing has happened.”

Given the absolute importance of school safety, the union will write to the Cabinet Secretary giving him 14 days to initiate stakeholder dialogue on school safety. If he fails to do this, KUPPET will resort to the courts to help force the minister to perform his constitutional functions, the KUPPET Secretary General concluded.

### **Education International: Condolences and support**

“Educators around the world mourn for the 14 young lives tragically cut short in the Kakamega Primary School tragedy. With heavy hearts we join our colleagues in Kenya calling for safe schools and government accountability,” stated David Edwards, Education International General Secretary.

Education International urges Kenya’s public authorities to ensure that all students, teachers, and education support personnel have a safe and quality learning, teaching and working environment throughout the country.

### **Persistent issues in the Kenyan education system**

As the Kenyan authorities display chronic negligence in terms of school safety, they are also driving a targeted campaign against the Kenya National Union of Teachers, one of the largest education unions in the country and an Education International affiliate. Over the past year, the Teachers Service Commission has tried to force a decrease in the number of educators affiliated to KNUT and has imposed discriminatory measures on KNUT members, affecting their income and opportunities for promotion.

Education International stands in solidarity with the Kenya National Union of Teachers and the Kenyan union movement in their struggle to defend the values of democracy, the rule of law, and union rights. The global

federation of education unions has encouraged all its member organisations to support the KNUT and urges the Teachers Service Commission and the government of Kenya to stop harassing the education union, its leaders and members, and to respect union rights as guaranteed by national laws and international standards.

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