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South African students face daily threats

JOHANNESBURG (CUP) --

Army dogs on the Wits University campus don't do algebra. They are trained to bite. Trained to bite students who dare to challenge the racist administration.

Campus life in South Africa is nothing like in Canada. Of course, there are lectures and labs, beer-drinking contests and a chess club. But tear gas and army tanks are as much part of student life as exams. Even the canine soldiers have marched many times over the football field, marking their territory.

Attending a Wits student council meeting is a challenge in itself. On Aug. 19, 116 students were arrested after the police and trained dogs surrounded their outdoor gathering and shoved as many as they could into a paddywagon.

The students were released by 3:00 the next morning but more were arrested several days later and 130 students are in court today facing charges of public violence and contempt of court.

The students at the meeting were planning a series of actions, including a class boycott to force the university administration to listen to their demands.

The first demand was the lifting of a Supreme Court injunction against any meeting of the South African Students Congress (Sasco) on campus. The second called for the disbanding of the undemocratic university council. None of the demands have been met.

Sasco is the principal student union in South Africa. Its goal is a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

Students under the Sasco banner say the administration is a dinosaur from the Apartheid education system and they want to change it. Apartheid education created separate funding schemes for blacks-only and whites-only schools.

Only about 30 per cent of Wits students are black. Most are in the arts faculties. Only nine per cent of engineering and science students are black. Student activists at Wits think of their university council, similar to the senate of a Canadian university, as white guys with ties protecting their assets.

Members of the council deny there's any problem.

"The council met and believes it is, and

will continue to be, a legitimate structure," said June Sinclair, the only woman on council. "We are representative of students' interests."

And Wits is considered to be a liberal, open university in the South African context. The University of Pretoria, in the capital, is a breeding ground for young racist minds. Despite the scrapping of Apartheid laws that restricted access to the school to white people

only, Apartheid is still the way of life. More than 10,000 students live on campus yet only one residence houses black students.

"There's no rule telling us where we are supposed to stay," said one black student. "It's just a question of survival tactics."

Black students have been threatened with violence and chased out of whites-only residences.

The University of the North, or "Turfloop" as it is called by the students, is built like a fort. Most buildings on the black campus have an outer wall with holes just the right size for the tip of an AK-47.

The hill on the northern side serves as a watch tower. Barbed wire and high fences are everywhere. When things get bad, there's even tripwire.

"It has to be built like a fort," said Oscar, a student activist at Turfloop and member of the South Africa Students Congress. "Our administration and our SRC (student representative council) are democratic, and that scares the shit out of the government."

The South African Defence Force has an army base less than a kilometre away, just north of the main gates.

"When they come in looking for student activists, sometimes we run like hell. Other times, we shoot back," Oscar said.

South Africa is transforming itself, slowly but surely. Apartheid laws were scrapped in Feb. 1990 after intense pressure from liberation groups like the African National Congress (ANC), and an international business and culture boycott. But laws are only one part of the racist regime.

The black majority in the country will vote for the first time in April's national elections. They will vote to change the government.

Maybe the education system will follow. People's minds will be the hardest to change.

DENIS BABIN