

Malawi: Police shoot peaceful demonstrators

David Rowan
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Police in the African country of Malawi opened fire on a peaceful demonstration on December 11, critically injuring two people. One of those shot in Zomba, in the south of the country, some 68 kilometres east of Malawi's commercial capital Blantyre, was Fanikiso Phiri (24), a third year Bachelor of Education student, who died in hospital from his injuries on December 14.

Polytechnic students in Blantyre reacted violently to the news of Phiri's death, congregating in groups chanting anti-government songs and throwing stones at vehicles. These continuing protests have since been met by the closure of the University of Malawi. A brief statement by the University Council ordered the students in the university town of Zomba to leave the campus by midday on December 17.

According to a police spokesman, at least 19 students from the two colleges have been arrested and will be charged with conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace.

The December 11 demonstration in Zomba had involved over a thousand people, including many students, who sang, "This is our country but the police and [President] Muluzi have destroyed it", to the tune of a 1915 revolutionary song composed during an uprising against British colonialists. "Policemen, prepare to pay the bill for the blood you spill," went another song.

Demonstrators also handed in a petition to the District Commissioner's Office addressed to the Malawi President Bikili Muluzi, protesting against rising food prices, especially maize, the price of which has risen by over 300 percent since July.

The students were joined on the march by Rastafarians, protesting against the death in police custody of the popular Malawian reggae singer Evison Matafale. Matafale was arrested late November, after writing a number of letters to President Muluzi critical of his policies. He died a few days later. A hospital

administrator said the 32-year-old singer, known as "the Prophet" in Malawi, died of severe pneumonia, but there is widespread anger over his death and suspicion of police complicity in it. Up to 10,000 people attended his funeral.

National Democratic Party (NDA) leader Nelson Wilfred Shaba was arrested December 10 for also writing letters critical of President Muluzi, and was charged with sedition. Shaba told reporters that he feared for his life and that his letters to the President had been of an "advisory" nature.

Eyewitnesses to the demonstration told the *Zomba Daily Times* that the march was "very peaceful and sensible" until heavily armed police arrived. Reports are unclear, but it seems that a number of members of parliament were using the University facilities for a workshop. Students asked them to leave and the police were called. Once the police arrived they started firing tear-gas. Police lobbed tear-gas canisters into the halls where lectures were taking place, causing panic and mayhem amongst the students.

Social and political tensions have been rising in the country throughout 2001. At the beginning of the year, floods devastated the south of Malawi, displacing up to 60,000 people and destroying maize crops. A recent report by the World Food Programme (WFP) states that in rural areas assessed by the WFP, "10 to 25 percent of the population... could be highly vulnerable" to food shortages. The government has imported 150 million kilograms of maize this year and some is available in markets, but it is so highly priced that the vast majority of Malawians cannot afford to buy this staple food. Before this latest WFP report it was already estimated that a quarter of all children under the age of five were chronically malnourished in Malawi.

A number of strikes involving teachers and hospital workers have broken out over the past months, after President Muluzi reneged on a promise to increase

wages. Muluzi also recently moved against a number of judges who were critical of his attempts to change the constitution, allowing him to run for a third term of office in 2004.

On November 14 the *BBC* reported that the European Union and the United States had suspended aid to Malawi, due to “corruption and economic mismanagement”. The EU suspended the release of 15 million euros (\$13m) and demanded the refund of seven million euros already distributed. Through the US Agency for Development and aid (USAID), the US government diverted at least \$6 million of the \$7 million it had allocated to Malawi to another country, according to the report. The *BBC* states that moves by the US and EU were in response to “the Malawi government’s decision to suspend its privatisation programme”.

Western governments are demanding that Malawi push ahead with the privatisation of power and telecommunications utilities, as well as water supplies and railways.

Malawi is one of the least developed countries in the world and relies almost entirely on Western donors. Its economy is based predominantly on agriculture, which accounts for half of its GDP. Some 65.3 percent of Malawi’s population of 10 million live in abject poverty. The number of people infected with HIV/AIDS is 800,000 and life expectancy in the country is below 40 years of age.



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