

# African students face Soviet racism

By Charles Quist Adade

**LENINGRAD** — Confirmation that African students have been killed in the Soviet Union has been given by the vice-president of the All-Union Council responsible for the welfare of foreign students, Cde Y. P. Kojayev. He said there had been a number of deaths, the most recent occurring in the Ukrainian town of Kharkov.

Cde Kojayev did not disclose how many Africans have been killed, their nat-

ionalities or the circumstances. But he attributed recent fights between Soviet youngsters and African students in towns like Rostov-on-the-Don, Minsk, Belgorod and Ufa to a section of Soviet youth which "does not have friendly relations with foreign students".

The Soviet leader said two culprits in the Kharkov killing have been given "the highest punishment of the land".

Cde Kharlov blamed the low level of internationalist education among Soviet youth for the incidents and called for "improvement in the internationalist upbringing of the youth".

Previous reports of racist

attacks against African students here were dismissed as "Western-orchestrated propaganda, lies and falsifications aimed at discouraging African students from studying in the USSR".

More than 13 000 African students study in the Soviet Union, nearly 10 percent of all foreign students. Over 5 000 African engineers and technicians have been trained here in the past 25 years.

Many African students welcome publication of Cde Kojayev's interview in an influential but limited circulation official publication as a sign that glasnost (openness) may yet end Soviet Press silence on issues concerning foreign students.

There is also an absence of well-researched journalism about African countries. Many articles reflect the stereotype and naive questions average citizens ask African students: "Do you have houses?", "What about cars?", "How do you live among crocodiles and snakes?"

This is hardly surprising, for a popular poem taught every Soviet schoolchild warns children not to go to Africa where crocodiles, snakes and other beasts are ready to devour them.

Some people grow up thinking that Africans arrive here in loin-cloths only to be provided with clothing by Soviet officials at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport.

Other youngsters blame the "influx" of foreign students for shortages of goods — and matters get worse when African students begin to date Soviet women. This factor may lie behind a number of clashes.

Africans particularly resent postings to the Central Asian republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Tajikistan where it is alleged they are treated with contempt and animosity because of xenophobia and dogmatic religious thinking.

Official Soviet policy is strictly anti-racist but racism is experienced even in large cities like Moscow and Leningrad.

A Zambian student at Patrice Lumumba Friend-

ship University in Moscow remarked: "It is really frustrating when everywhere you go you are greeted with racial invectives like 'Chernoe more (Black Sea), misha (black bear) and obezyana (monkey)'."

A Mozambican student complained in a youth television programme in Leningrad recently that "I am called SPID (AIDS) all over the place."

Until the recent disturbances in Armenia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, Soviet leaders and the mass media have tended to hide behind phrases such as "international brotherhood" and "racism and socialism are incompatible".

Journalists often wrote that racial and national prejudice were relics of the past, having dissolved in the new socialist consciousness.

Incidents of racial discrimination were considered worth writing about if they took place in the West or in South Africa. Demonstrations organised by African students against racialism in Soviet cities were never reported.

Many Africans arrive with sympathies for Soviet society but leave nursing anti-Soviet, anti-Marxist feelings. They are jolted when they hear Soviet youngsters shout "negr," the equivalent of "nigger," or hear the Lumumba University campus referred to as "the zoo".

Some Africans ignore the slurs, but others protest, which often ends in fights. When fighting occurs, African students are almost invariably found guilty by the police, itself racist. The standard charge has always been that the Africans involved were drunk.

Now there are fears over the emergence of the Pamyat (Memory) society, a fascist organisation which wants to "cleanse" Russian society of Jews, blacks and other races. Some students feel that the recent upsurge of anti-black feelings can be traced to Pamyat's xenophobic propaganda.

Africans, however, say that compared with their contemporaries in the West, "we are paupers". Says one: "Why are we being singled out for lashing? We don't lead lives different from our colleagues from Latin America and Asia."

A number of African governments pay their students allowances of US\$30-\$60 a month to supplement the 90 rubles paid by the Soviet government.

During vacations students scramble for visas to travel by train to Western Europe, mainly to West Berlin, London, France, and recently Turkey to buy fashionable clothes and electrical products for sale in the Soviet shadow market.

"This is how we are able to make it here," explains a Zimbabwean student. "Colleagues not fortunate enough to get supplementary allowances from their governments are not finding it easy at all managing with 90 rubles — which is meant to buy our personal needs from food, books and stationery to clothing."

In order to survive, some students undertake currency and business transactions. They take rubles from their Soviet clients to travel to the West with a promise to buy them specific items. In some

cases the student is unable to honour the promise, and several have been killed in revenge.

The problem, however, may be with the programmes provided for Third World students rather than with general standards. Curricula in most educational establishments which host students from the developing world are far too Eurocentric and Russian-biased.

At the Leningrad State University, for instance, not a single Third World writer is studied in a four-year course in foreign literature. The philosophy course is read as though Africa lies slumbering in a philosophical vacuum.

In addition, some institutions are not equipped or ready to train foreign students. Journalism students in Leningrad go through a five-year programme without seeing a Latin-alphabet typewriter. They learn to type on Russian typewriters as though on graduation they are to write for TASS or Pravda. — GEMINI.