

DAKAR, Senegal: Thiany Dior usually rises before dawn, tiptoeing carefully among thin foam mats laid out on the floor as she leaves the cramped dormitory room she shares with half a dozen other women. It was built for two.

In the vast auditorium at the law school at Cheikh Anta Diop University, she secures a seat two rows from the front, two hours before class. If she sat too far back, she would not hear the professor's lecture over the two tinny speakers, and would be more likely to join the 70 percent who fail their first- or second-year exams at the university.

Those who arrive later perch on cinderblocks in the aisles, or strain to hear from the gallery above. By the time class starts, 2,000 young bodies crowd the room in a muffled din of shuffling paper, throat clearing and jostling. Outside, dozens of students, early arrivals for the next class, mill about noisily.

"I cannot say really we are all learning, but we are trying," said Dior. "We are too many students."

Africa's best universities, the grand institutions that educated a revolutionary generation of nation builders and statesmen, doctors and engineers, writers and intellectuals, are collapsing. It is partly a self-inflicted crisis of mismanagement and neglect, but it is also the result of international development policies that for decades have favored basic education over higher learning even as a population explosion propels more young people than ever toward the already strained institutions.

The decrepitude is forcing the best and brightest from countries across Africa to seek their education and fortunes abroad and depriving dozens of nations of the homegrown expertise that could lift millions out of poverty.

The Commission for Africa, a British government research organization, said in a 2005 report that African universities were in a "state of crisis" and were failing to produce the professionals desperately needed to develop the poorest continent. Far from being a tool of social mobility, the repository of a nation's hopes for the future, Africa's universities have instead become warehouses for a generation of young people for whom society has little use and who can expect to be just as poor as their uneducated parents.

"Without universities there is no hope of progress, but they have been allowed to crumble," said Penda Mbow, a historian and labor activist at Cheikh Anta Diop who has struggled to improve conditions for students and professors. "We are throwing away a whole generation."

As a result, universities across Africa have become hotbeds of discontent, occupying a dangerous place at the intersection of politics and crime. In Ivory Coast, student union leaders played a large role in stirring up xenophobia that led to civil war. In Nigeria, elite schools have been overrun by violent criminal gangs. These gangs have hired themselves out to politicians, contributing to the deterioration of the electoral process in Nigeria.

In Senegal, the university has been racked repeatedly by sometimes violent strikes by students seeking improvements in their living conditions and increases in the tiny stipends for living expenses. Students have refused to attend classes and set up burning barricades on a central avenue that runs past the university.

In the early days, postcolonial Africa had few institutions as venerable and fully developed as its universities. The University of Ibadan in southwest Nigeria, the intellectual home of the Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka, was regarded in 1960 as one of the best universities in the British Commonwealth. Makerere University in Uganda was considered the Harvard of Africa, and it trained a whole generation of postcolonial leaders, including Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

And in Senegal, Cheikh Anta Diop, then known as the University of Dakar, drew students from across francophone Africa and transformed them into doctors, engineers and lawyers whose credentials were considered equal to those of their French counterparts.

The experience of students like Dior could not be further from that of men like Ousmane Camara, a former president of Senegal's highest court, who attended the same law school in the late 1950s. A

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cracked, yellowing photograph from 1957 shows the entire law school student body in a single frame, fewer than 100 students.

"We lived in spacious rooms, with more than enough for each to have its own," Camara said. "We had a minibus that drove us to and from class."

The young men in the photo went on to do great things: Camara's classmate Abdou Diouf became Senegal's second president. Others became top government officials and businessmen, shaping the nation's fortunes after it won independence from France in 1960.

Today, nearly 60,000 students are crammed on a campus with just 5,000 dormitory beds. Renting a room in Dakar is so expensive that students pack themselves into tiny rooms by the half dozen.

Firmin Manga, a third-year English student from the southern region of Casamance, was lucky enough to be assigned a cramped, airless single room. But six of his friends were not so fortunate, so he invited them to share. In a space barely wide enough for two twin beds, the young men have squeezed four foam mattresses, which serve as beds, desks, dining tables and couches. Their clothes were neatly packed into a single closet, a dozen pairs of shoes carefully balanced on a ledge above the doorway.

"We have to live like this," Manga said, perched on his bed late one night.

"Two will sleep here," he said, placing his palm on a ratty scrap of foam. "Two over there, and two over there. Then one more mattress is underneath my bed."

Once the last mattress is laid out there is no floor space left. Manga works on his thesis, a treatise comparing the grammar of his native Dioula language with English, early in the morning, before any else wakes up.

"That is my quiet time alone," he said.

The graffiti-scarred dormitories, crisscrossed by clotheslines, look more like housing projects for the poor than rooms for the country's brightest youths. A \$12 million renovation of the library modernized what had been a musty, crowded outpost on campus into a modern building with Internet access. But technology does not help with its most basic problem: it still only has 1,700 chairs. Students study in stairwells and sprawled in corners.

In a chemistry lab in the science department, students take turns carrying out basic experiments with broken beakers and pipettes.

Equally frustrated are the professors, many of whom could pursue careers abroad but choose to remain in Senegal. Alphonse Tiné, a professor of chemistry, said he struggled to balance his research with the demands of teaching thousands of students.

"If I went abroad maybe I would have more salary, better equipment, fewer students," Tiné said. "I studied on a government scholarship abroad, so I felt I owed my country to stay. But it is very hard."

Tiné, 58, plans to stay in Senegal for the rest of his career. But many educated Africans will not. The International Organization for Migration estimates that Africa has lost 20,000 educated professionals every year since 1990. Those who can afford it send their children abroad for college. Some of those who cannot push their sons and even their daughters to migrate, often illegally.

The disarray of Africa's universities did not happen by chance. In the 1960s, universities were seen as the incubator of the vanguard that would drive development in the young nations of newly liberated Africa, and postcolonial governments spent lavishly on campuses, research facilities, scholarships and salaries for academics.

But corruption and mismanagement led to the economic collapses that swept much of Africa in the 1970s, and universities were among the first institutions to suffer. As idealistic postcolonial governments gave way to more cynical and authoritarian ones, universities, with their academic freedoms, democratic tendencies and elitist airs, became a nuisance.

When the World Bank and International Monetary Fund came to bail out African governments with their economic reforms — a bitter cocktail that included currency devaluation, opening of markets and privatization — higher education was usually low on the list of priorities. Fighting poverty required basic skills and literacy, not doctoral students. In the mid-1980s nearly a fifth of World Bank's education spending worldwide went to higher education. A decade later, it had dwindled to just 7 percent.

Meanwhile, welcome money flooded into primary and secondary education. But it set up a time bomb: as more young people got a basic education, more wanted to go to college. In 1984, just half of Senegal's children went to primary school, but 20 years later more than 90 percent do.

And more of those children have gone on to high school: Africa has the world's highest growth rate of high school attendance. Abdou Salam Sall, rector of the Cheikh Anta Diop, said 9,000 students earned a baccalaureate in Senegal in 2000, entitling them to university admission. By 2006 there were more than twice that. The university cannot handle the influx. Its budget is \$32 million, less than \$600 per student. That money must also maintain a 430-acre campus, pay salaries and finance research.

Even those lucky enough to graduate will have difficulty finding a job in their struggling economies. As few as one third of African university graduates find work, according to the Association of African Universities.

Governments and donors in some countries are starting to spend more on higher education. The World Bank chipped in for Cheikh Anta Diop's library renovation, and a coalition of foundations called the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa has pledged \$200 million to help African universities over the next five years.

Fatou Kiné Camara, a law professor and the daughter of Camara, the former judge, said she felt the frustration of her students as she struggled to teach a class of thousands. When the students cannot hear her over the loudspeaker, they hurl vulgar insults, a taboo in a society that prides itself on decorum and respect for elders.

"They are angry, and I cannot blame them," she said. "The country has nothing to offer them, and their education is worthless. It doesn't prepare them for anything."

Attempts to reduce the student population by admitting fewer students are seen as political suicide — student unions play a big role in elections, and the country's leaders are fearful of widespread discontent among the educated youth. Senegal has created new universities in provincial capitals like Saint Louis and Ziguinchor, but few students want to attend them because they are new and untested, and the government has not forced the issue.

"They fear us because we are the young, and the future belongs to us," said Babacar Sohkna, a student union leader. "But where is our future? We are just waiting here for poverty."

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