

South African universities face Israel scanner as government backs Palestine

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Wits University protest [Courtesy of Zahra Carrim]

Protesters at Wits University hold placards in support of Gaza [Courtesy of Zahra Carrim]

Johannesburg, May 27 (RHC)-- On May 13th, 10 tents were pitched on the pristine lawns of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) in Johannesburg. It was a pro-Palestine encampment that became known as the "Liberated Zone."

Students, many wearing keffiyehs, took to the lawns next to the main library, typically used as a space to relax and eat, as the demarcated area for their act of protest and solidarity.

In capitals around the world, South Africa has emerged as a leading supporter of the Palestinian cause, calling for an end to Israel's war on Gaza and pushing the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to issue tough strictures against Israel. But back home, South Africa's higher education institutions are grappling with some of the same debates and protests that have roiled campuses in the United States and Europe, where governments have been criticised for their continued support to Israel.

South Africa's highest-ranking universities have refused to disclose their ties with Israeli organisations and institutions, and have resisted student calls for a total academic boycott.

While Wits University agreed to publicly condemn Israel's military invasion of Gaza and call for a ceasefire, it has pushed back against demands from student protesters to cut ties with Israel.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) has yet to decide on calls for severing ties with Israel-linked institutions.

This comes as South African government officials called on universities not to be "neutral" in their stance on Palestine and to institute academic boycotts similar to what was imposed globally against apartheid South Africa.

On the second day of the Wits student protest, the encampment had expanded to more than 50 tents, each with a dedicated study, sleeping and even an art area. A few days later, a week into the protest, university security officials arrived at the encampment to evict the students. They removed Palestinian flags and posters with messages of solidarity and calls to end the "genocide in Gaza". They also tore up posters expressing support for victims of other conflicts in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Raees Noorbhai, a spokesperson for the Wits Palestine Solidarity Committee, said the university responded poorly to student demands for full disclosure of its ties with Israeli universities and organisations. "Wits has not adopted academic boycott as a position. The resolution adopted in the senate called for a ceasefire but didn't go much further than that," he said.

Noorbhai, who is currently studying for a master's degree in astrophysics, added that the protesters were determined to push university management to disclose its ties with Israel fully.

When deciding to set up encampments, students told Al Jazeera they were inspired by their peers at universities in the U.S. and elsewhere. "When we started talking about an encampment, the plans began organically," said Kouthar Hussain, a student from Johannesburg.

"Students were very welcoming. We realised that many students didn't know what was happening in the world, and when we told them what was happening, they came to support us," Hussain said.

On the fourth day of the protest, students marched to a sitting of the Wits University Senate – an influential structure – to make their demands known. One of these demands was met. History lecturer Noor Nieftagodien told Al Jazeera that the university's management voted in favour of an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. "The senate voted to support an immediate end to the violence," he said.

The senate did not accede to the students' other demands, including disclosing its links with Israeli institutions and companies.

Wits management subsequently gave students an ultimatum to vacate the encampment or face possible academic exclusions; non-students would face trespassing charges. "Wits management is happy to adopt words of support for Palestine but continue to show in their actions that this is not the case," a spokesperson representing the students at the Wits Liberated Zone said in a statement on May 19.

The protesters did not resist security officials and left behind just one tent as a symbol of solidarity. They also left bloodied dolls wrapped in white cloth around the university lawns as a symbol of the children killed in Gaza. Later that evening, security cleared the lawns.

Wits University has not responded to a request for comment on their decision to dismantle the Liberated Zone encampment.

Since the start of Israel's military offensive on Gaza last October, the Wits Palestine Solidarity Committee has held protests and demonstrations of solidarity on campus.

Students have been demanding that management fully disclose the university's relationships with Israeli-aligned universities and companies; take a public position in solidarity with Palestine; adopt a position supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement; and bring an end to censorship and intimidation of pro-Palestinian activists and activities on campus.

The student activists believe that a full academic boycott is the only route to get Wits University to stand with Palestine fully, Noorbhai explained.

He said students were inspired by the effectiveness of the series of boycotts of South African academic institutions and scholars initiated in the 1960s, at the request of the African National Congress (ANC), aimed at using international pressure to force the end to South Africa's apartheid system.

Student activists have been making similar demands in their public solidarity with Palestine for years.

In 2011, academics at the University of Johannesburg voted to end its 25-year relationship with Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, an occupied Palestinian city officially known as Be'er-Sheva in Israel.

But, on the whole, South African universities have resisted calls for a full-blown academic boycott.

Midway through the Wits University protest, students of the University of Cape Town (UCT) – the highest-ranked university in Africa – also erected an encampment of tents bearing Palestinian flags and banners.

Hundreds of students gathered to call for financial and academic boycotts of Israel because of the Gaza war and the occupation of Palestinian land. They said they wanted their university's management to fully disclose its financial and academic ties with Israel and Israeli universities. "This encampment is to bring solidarity with the people of Palestine who have been displaced by the occupation of Israel. It is also to bring awareness to students," a spokesperson for the UCT4Palestine campaign said.

Students laid out a poster at the entrance of the university's Sarah Baartman Hall, which is named after a Khoikhoi woman who was sold to slavery and has long been a powerful symbolic figure in South Africa.

The poster listed the names of thousands of Palestinian children who have been killed in the ongoing invasion of Gaza.

During mass gatherings, students held banners that read: "How many students need to be killed before UCT does something?"

UCT spokesperson Elijah Moholola told local media at the start of the encampment that university management supported peaceful protests by students. "UCT has always upheld the right by any members of the campus community to embark on peaceful and lawful protest. The executive has not been formally engaged by nor received any correspondence from the group."

While the encampment was disbanded due to health concerns – some students tested positive for COVID-19 – activists said they were determined to ensure a full academic boycott.

Prior to the encampment, in April, the UCT Senate had resolved to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and further resolved that: “No UCT academic may enter into relations, or continue relations with any research group and/or network whose author affiliations are with the Israeli [army] and/or the broader Israeli military establishment.” The move came after students held regular protests on campus demanding action from university management.

While the senate made a call for a ceasefire, the university council, which oversees the senate, has not yet called for a ceasefire.

Another prominent South African university, the University of Fort Hare, has taken a stronger stance than Wits University and UCT, committing not to pursue any relationship with Israeli institutions.

South Africa’s politicians, however, are more vocal about the situation. Deputy Higher Education Minister Buti Manamela told Al Jazeera that South African universities could not remain neutral on Palestine.

“We really want to see our universities and institutional organisations doing what most institutions did to apartheid: boycott it. We cannot mince our words when it comes to that,” he said.

Manamela said the government had cautioned university management against shutting down protests in support of Palestine. “Universities have been destroyed, and academics have been killed [in Gaza]. How dare we want to be neutral,” he said.

Speaking at a memorial lecture on May 8 in honour of the assassinated Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, International Relations and Cooperation Minister Naledi Pandor called on South African students to lead the way in solidarity with Palestinians.

“Our institutions of higher learning have a special responsibility to lead by example and provide moral and political leadership given that they claim to play a key role in advancing critical citizenship,” she said. “This has been done by our institutions in the battle against apartheid and must be done again.”

Pandor later applauded students for their efforts to support Palestine.

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