

Students' scorched earth policy

Professor Salim Abdool Karim reflects on what the destruction of UKZN's law library through arson means to him

ON THE crisp, sunny morning of Wednesday, September 7, I was shaken and heartbroken as I walked through the burnt out ruins of the Howard College law library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which had been set ablaze as part of student protests the night before.

The hallowed halls of this library served two of South Africa's chief justices, Mogoeng Mogoeng and Sandile Ngcobo, when they were law students.

I was dismayed at the senseless destruction of this library, given its rich legacy of training some of the best and brightest minds in the legal fraternity.

Having attended the original opening of this (extended) law library years ago, I know it was held in high regard and remained an intellectual home to our students and academic staff in the law faculty.

It was devastating walking through the burnt-out rubble of what was once a collection of historical South African Law Reports.

The dean of law, Professor Managay Reddi, and head of the

libraries, Joyce Myeza, joined me briefly as we walked around with two of the law library staff, including Kadephi Majola.

I listened as witnesses recounted the previous day's events: At around 1pm on Tuesday, about 50 students protested near the main library and the nearby law library.

In response, both libraries were shut for the safety of the students and staff. At about 1.30pm, the police used teargas and rubber bullets to disperse the protesting crowd.

An uneasy calm followed until just after 5pm, when it seems a petrol bomb was thrown through the last window, into the furthest corner of the library.

Looking at the damage, the fire must have swirled up to the ceiling and burnt out the entire corner and most of the room, including the entire mezzanine floor where the students study.

Many of the old South African Law Reports were destroyed, while the law text books from the neighbouring shelf oozed their yellow melted binding material, almost in a cry of anguish.

The smoke and soot had spread



The charred remains of books shown in the law library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which was set on fire this week.

throughout the library, covering thousands of books, even those further away from the site of the blaze.

Black soot covered everything – the computers, chairs, counters and the floor. It pained me to step through the burnt books for they were the repositories of knowledge for posterity.

From my earliest days as a student, I developed a deep sense of respect for libraries as the citadels of knowledge, not merely for today's students but for our children's children to have access to the precious knowledge accumulated over decades and centuries.

Holding my head in my hands,

it dawned on me that the student protests had turned to a "scorched earth" approach.

Burning the law library was not an isolated incident. The student protest saw the burning of the Howard College campus coffee shop the previous week, the torching of the main hall on the Pietermaritzburg campus and the senate chamber on the Westville campus.

Buildings were not their only targets. Six cars were set alight after the road was blockaded with burning tyres and rocks the night before on the Westville campus.

The students' actions herald a new low in which nothing on campus is sacrosanct, not even

the library, which is the lifeblood that nourishes the growing minds of students and academics with information and knowledge so that they may become the protectors of our future with sage wisdom.

I wondered, in despair: Have we sunk to the point where arson has become a tool for activism?

There are no winners in this situation. Those responsible must be brought to book.

In the light of the protests at the library in the hours leading up to the arson attack, the disclaimers by some student leaders ring hollow.

But it is deeply concerning to hear of brutal actions against students by police in their attempts

to control the crowds. This is a sure path to escalating a conflict.

As I turned the corner on my way out of the law library, I spotted a soot-covered poster of the UKZN pact on the wall.

It read, "We, the staff and students of UKZN, agree to treat each other with respect, to abide by the rules and regulations of the institution and to commit ourselves to excellence in research-led teaching and learning."

The irony was not lost on me as I shook my head at the destruction, disrespect, and rule-breaking behaviour of those committed to destroying the source of information and knowledge in law needed for excellence in teaching,

learning and research.

As I left the building, my mind dwelt on my tasks for the day ahead. Walking down the Howard College stairs, I concluded I would not let the arsonists define my way forward.

I committed myself to do my best to join with others in redoubling our constructive efforts to better understand each other; to find common ground and take bold steps to protect and promote university education and research as our path to freedom and prosperity in South Africa.

• *Karim is an internationally respected scientist and the university's pro vice-chancellor of research.*