

Kenya's Garissa University reopens nine months after massacre

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January 6, 2016

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) Faculty and administrators at Garissa University College returned to work Monday (January 4), nine months after a bloody massacre of mainly Christian students by Somalia's al-Shabaab militants forced its closure.

Government officials and some analysts hailed the reopening of the campus in Kenya's northeastern region as a defeat for terrorists.

On April 2, gunmen wielding AK-47s stormed the college and held it for more than 10 hours. By the end of the siege, 148 people, mainly Christian students, lay dead in the bloodbath, the deadliest in Kenya. Al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, claimed responsibility.

But only an estimated 60 students attended when classes resumed. Before the attack, the university had about 800 students.

Roman Catholic bishop Joseph Alessandro of the Garissa Diocese welcomed the reopening but said only local people, mainly Muslims, were arriving at the institution, the only university in the largely Muslim north.

Christians, he said, "are still scared. We hope they will soon join."

A police station has been set up within the campus. The government promised to erect a security wall around the school's perimeter, as well, said Ahmed Osman Warfa, a university staff member.

"I wish I was armed and trained when the attackers struck," Warfa told Kenyan newspapers. "I would have defended my students against them. It pains me that we lost so many."

Student survivors of the attack are unlikely to return to the college, according to George Ogalo, national director of Fellowship of Christian Unions, an umbrella organization at Kenyan universities and colleges. The union worked with the student survivors of the attack.

“It is too early to imagine the same students would go back,” Ogalo said. “They have scars and wounds both physically and psychologically, which are still too fresh.”

Ogalo added that the college should reopen with new students and the government should move to assure the students on their security.