AG probes Soroti University exorbitant legal services

By Moses Walubiri

Would it make economic sense to hire a lawyer at sh127m to defend a case whose economic value is sh110m? Perhaps not.

However, this is the kind of transaction the top echelon of Soroti University sanctioned in July 2017, which saw its top brass come under scrutiny by lawmakers sitting on the public accountability committee yesterday.

In total, Soroti University expended sh1.02bn on Okurut and Company Advocates, to render legal services in a process that flouted the requisite legal procedure that precedes entering contracts of that financial magnitude.

When asked about the impugned contract between the university and the aforesaid law firm, the deputy vice-chancellor, Lawrence Okema, passed the blame to the former university secretary, Ruth Achimo, and a lawyer, who is no longer an employee.

Okema was part of the university technocrats who were at Parliament to answer queries raised by the Auditor General, John Muwanga, in his audit report for the financial year 2017/18.

"The legal officer drafted the agreement and the accounting officer signed it. The accounting officer (Achimo) is currently being prosecuted over corruption-related matters," Okema said, when asked by Wilberforce Yaguma (Kashari North) and Fredrick Angura (Tororo South) about the irregularities in the varsity’s contract with the firm.

queries regarding contract

Okema told MPs that the contracts committee he chaired at the time had no say in the university’s contract with the law firm.

In his report for the financial year ending June 2018, Muwanga raised a slew of queries regarding the contract.

As one of the three law firms pre-qualified to provide legal services for a period of 18 months, the university’s top echelon did not have qualms agreeing to sh15m net in monthly retainers fee, despite its human resource structure providing for an in-house lawyer at sh6m a month.

Besides, Muwanga noted that the university did not seek the approval of the Solicitor General before sanctioning the contract as required for procurements exceeding sh200m.

Muwanga also queried the payment of Value-Added Tax (VAT) amounting to sh141m to the law firm, even though the invoices presented for payment did not indicate that Okurut and Company Advocates was VAT registered.

However, it was the payment of litigation fees that shocked lawmakers.

In one instance, the university was charged sh64.9m to file an appeal and sh62.5m to stay execution of the order, pending hearing of the same appeal.

In total, "Soroti University paid sh127.4m in legal fees for an appeal of only sh110m," Muwanga said.

Although he agreed to having played a role in the pre-qualification of the three law firms, Okema told MPs that the contracts committee he chaired at the time neither had a say in agreeing upon the winner nor doing out of the questionable ‘generous’ terms.

Two months ago, Achimo and other former Soroti University technocrats were arraigned before the Anti-Corruption Division of the High Court at Kololo.

The decision to spend sh1bn on legal services in the manner it did is an irony for a university whose embryonic stage has been plagued by financial constraints.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

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