

Cabinet sets up committee to engage striking doctors

By Vision Reporters

Cabinet has instituted a special committee to engage doctors in talks aimed at ending the strike which has paralysed public health facilities across the country.

The appointment was announced by the Prime Minister, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, in a brief statement issued last evening.

Rugunda said Cabinet set up the committee during a meeting held yesterday after it was briefed by the health minister, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, about the 'damage' the strike had caused.

The committee comprises the ministers of health, finance, public service, education and sports, gender, and the Attorney General.

It was not clear whether the committee and the striking medical staff had held their first engagement.

Sources said the committee had planned on commencing their engagements with the doctors (last night).

Earlier, the permanent secretary at the health ministry, Dr Diana Atwine, said President Yoweri Museveni had directed that the salary review commission hosted at

the public service ministry engages the striking doctors.

Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of the Uganda Medical Association, said they had not received invitation to meet the salary review commission, adding that they would be "happy to do so".

Obuku said they had only received verbal communication from Rugunda to engage with the salary review commission.

The doctors' industrial action started on Monday, November 6, after the medics met with Museveni on October 31 but could not agree on a way forward.

Among others, the doctors want 'better pay' and better working conditions in which facilities are functional and equipped.

Worsening situation

The situation threatened to worsen yesterday following unconfirmed reports that medical interns had also voted to hang their gloves.

Some public facilities were not fully functional.

At the Kawempe extension of Mulago Hospital, the immunisation section was not working while mothers were seen with their

BETWEEN THE LINES

■ The doctors' industrial action started on Monday, November 6, after the medics met with Museveni on October 31 but could not agree on a way forward. Among others, the doctors are asking for 'better pay' and better working conditions in which facilities are functional and equipped.

babies leaving the facility.

A mother who preferred anonymity said when she reached the immunisation section, she was told that the doctors are striking and, therefore, her daughter cannot be immunised.

Mother sent home

Another mother said she was also told to go back home. By press time, the immunisation section was empty unlike other days.

A source at the hospital said the few available doctors were handling only emergency cases such as mothers who had failed to deliver and were referred to the theatre for operations.

"The mothers who had failed



Student doctors at Mulago Hospital last week. Photo by Kennedy Oryema

to deliver normally are only handled by the doctors and the rest are delivered by the midwives," the source said.

He added that the mothers who are seeking antenatal services are also turned away.

At the labour wards, the intern doctors were also not working — because they cannot work without the supervision of doctors.

In Hoima, there has been a decrease in the number of patients visiting public health centres.

A source at Hoima Hospital on Monday said that there has been a decrease in the number of in-patients from 150 to about 40 per day, while out-patients have decreased from 1,000 to 100 per day.

During a monitoring visit, the Hoima resident district commissioner (RDC), John Steven Ekomu, pleaded with the hospital staff to go back to work as government handles their grievances.

Interns threaten action

Intern doctors at Hoima Hospital also threatened to lay down their tools and join their colleagues.

At Kigoroby Health Centre IV, the number of patients has also reduced and only nurses were on duty.

In Kagadi Hospital, patients were stranded.

There was not a single health worker at the outpatient department despite the presence of patients.

A patient in Kagadi said she went to the hospital on Thursday last week but the pharmacy was closed and she could not access her dose of Anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). She was told to go back on Monday but still there was no one to attend to her.

By 10:00am, the pharmacy was still closed.

At the Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) clinic, hundreds of clients were being registered by volunteers. The dental department was open with health workers on duty.

The maternity ward was fully functional with midwives attending to expectant mothers and those who had already delivered. The paediatric ward had health workers to attend to the children although no medical officer was seen at the time.

The nutrition department was open and functioning normally.

Dr Isaac Kakibogo, the medical superintendent of Kagadi Hospital, said he was mobilising the health workers to attend to emergencies.

Compiled by John Agaba, Violet Nabantanzi, Ismael Kasooa and Robert Atuhairwe