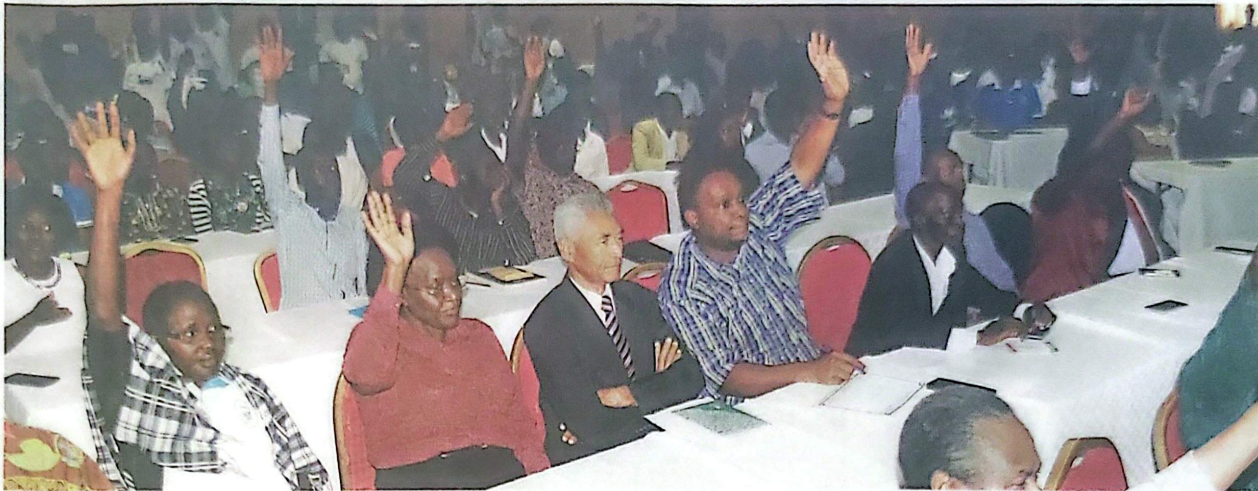


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Doctors raising their hands to vote on whether to suspend the strike or not during their meeting at Silver Springs Hotel in Kampala yesterday

BY VICKY WANDAWA

Doctors have voted to suspend the strike until December 16, following the Government's pledge to review their salaries.

The sit-down strike, which commenced on November 6, was declared by Uganda Medical Association (UMA), decrying the Government's reluctance to respond to their demands for allowances since they lodged the demand in Parliament in July last year.

The announcement was made during the doctors' general assembly held yesterday at Silver Springs Hotel in Bugolobi, a Kampala suburb.

The state minister for Finance, David Bahati, appealed to the medical workers to suspend the strike as their issues are being addressed. He explained that a team to review the salaries had been put in place, and a decision would be communicated by December 15.

One hundred thirteen medical workers supported the suspension until

DOCTORS CALL OFF STRIKE

December 16 as negotiations continue, while 76 wanted the strike to continue until government implements what has been agreed. There were six abstentions. Earlier on November 20, a meeting was held between the UMA and the Cabinet committee set up to negotiate on behalf of the Government.

MONTHLY ALLOWANCES

In a letter signed by Bahati, the Government agreed to start paying doctors in public health facilities duty facilitation allowances.

Other offers included payment of senior house officers (doctors studying master's degrees), who have not been earning salary for their work in hospitals during the time of study.

According to the letter communicating the Government's commitment,

there are 559 senior house officers, who will share the initial sh4.2b that is to be paid on a monthly basis immediately after verification.

However, the Ministry of Health was mandated to develop a policy defining the senior officers and develop their position in the hospital structure within 30 days.

The Government also agreed to reinstate the bachelor's degree medical interns to sh940,000 monthly allowances each. The health ministry had recently slashed the interns' monthly allowances to sh740,000 per person.

MEDICINE, MEDICAL SUPPLIES

Apart from demanding an increment in salaries and duty allowances, the doctors demanded a review of the supply chain and management of medicines, vaccines and medical supplies.

Bahati said in order to address drug inadequacies, the Government okayed a supplementary budget of sh41b in the current financial year 2017/2018.

The National Medical Stores (NMS) is charged with procuring, storage and distribution of essential medicines and medical supplies to all public health facilities in the country.

The agency has always been accused of delayed drug deliveries, resulting in shortages in some public health facilities.

HEALTH MONITORING TEAM

UMA had also asked for the disbandment of the State House Medicines and Health Services Delivery Monitoring Unit, which has been cracking down on corruption in the health sector. They complained that it

targets and unfairly treats doctors. However Bahati said: "It will not be disbanded but action will be taken to address the doctors' complaints."

Also, the Government asked UMA to submit the report of all complaints against the unit to the security minister within 10 days. The minister will then submit a report to Premier, Ruhakana Rugunda for consideration by the Government.

Shortly after the onset of the strike, the health minister, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, told the parliamentary health committee that the sh29m given to MPs to consult on the proposal to amend the Constitution had sparked the ongoing industrial action by doctors.

Orders by Aceng and the president ordering them back to work were met with deaf ears. Meanwhile, private

health facilities countrywide were overwhelmed by a huge number of patients as a result of the ongoing health workers' strike. Uganda Police Force and Uganda People's Defence Force doctors had to fill the void.

DOCTORS SPEAK OUT

Dr. Warren Tumwine said it is important to put measures in place to ensure that government implements its promises, adding that government is famous for making promises but not implementing them.

He also said senior consultants have been working at several clinics for survival, leaving the work overload to junior doctors, therefore, increasing their salaries will reduce the work overload on junior doctors.

Dr. Kassi Eryasa from Mbarara hospital asked UMA to engage local branches in the management of the National Executive Committee activities to allow visibility of the association.

Additional reporting by Vivian Agaba, Mary Karugaba, Violet Nabatanzi and Juliet Waiswa