

MPs grill minister as doctors strike hits mothers, HIV/AIDS people

By Vision Reporters

Legislators on the parliamentary health committee yesterday tasked the Minister of Health, Dr Jane Ruth Aceng, with explaining the Government plan to end the strike by the medical workers that has paralysed health services across the country.

The strike has hit the pregnant women and people living with HIV/AIDS hardest, according to reports received by the *New Vision* from various parts of the country.

Aceng, Dr Joyce Kaducu, the state minister for primary healthcare, Dr Diana Atwine, health ministry permanent secretary and Gyagenda Ssegawa, the under-secretary appeared before the committee to explain the current situation relating to the strike that started on Monday.

The committee chairperson, Dr Micheal Bukenya (Bukuya County) asked Aceng what plans her ministry has to implement the Government's programme of improving the medics' welfare.

Katikamu South MP Edward Sembatya argued that the health ministry has failed to implement the agreed position with other stakeholders to improve the medical workers pay.

The Uganda Medical Association (UMA) wants the lowest paid medic to earn sh6.5m a month up from sh350,000, in addition to accommodation, transport and other amenities.

They want the monthly salary of a senior consultant, the highest paid medical worker, increased from



Minister Jane Aceng (second-left) and Dr Diana Atwine (centre) chat with Mbatekamwa Gaffa, MP for Kasambya County, after they appeared before the health committee at Parliament yesterday. Photo by Miriam Namutebi

sh3.4m to sh35m.

Dr Aceng was non-committal on increasing the pay for the medics. She said her ministry has presented its proposal to the Secretary to the Treasury. She, however, noted that there are budgetary constraints.

She re-affirmed government's stand asking the striking doctors to wait until the Government finalises the public service pay policy, which is in its final stages. The policy will address pay disparities in public service.

Answering another question asked by MP Joel Sebikaali (Ntwerwe County), Aceng said this financial year, her ministry received sh4.4b for medics undertaking

further studies.

She explained that her ministry also received sh9.3b for medics on internship totalling 1,045.

Ssegawa argued that the demands by the medics were unrealistic. "If the Government is to increase pay for the 45,000 medical workers, it will also need additional money to cater for their pension and gratuities as required by the law, when they retire from the service," Ssegawa argued.

Meanwhile, the strike has forced pregnant mothers to resort to traditional birth attendants (TBA), especially in Iganga district.

According to Geoffrey Mutebi, the village chairman

of Makuutu, Makuutu sub-county in Iganga district, there are over 12 TBAs still operating in the area. He said the number of pregnant women seeking the services of TBA has shot up.

Dr David Muwanguzi, the Iganga district health officer, said the Government banned TBAs in 2009. "Nonetheless, many still seek their services, especially in the rural areas. Scarcity of health workers, long distances to health centres and social attitudes are among the factors fuelling the preference for TBAs," Muwanguzi said.

He attributed the ongoing doctors' strike to why the services of TBAs are becoming relevant to mainly rural

In some hospitals, health workers ask for money before attending to patients.

mothers.

Dr Peter Waiswa of Makerere University School of Public Health disclosed that Iganga and Mayuge districts alone have an estimated 85 TBAs.

The operations in many hospitals and health centres across the country remain paralysed by the strike.

At Kawempe Hospital, the casualties area and the waiting bay are still deserted. Only a handful of hospital support staff could be seen.

A source said the hospital has not made any new admissions of patients since the strike started because nurses are also not working.

The source added that some of the medical workers on duty were asking for money before attending to a patient.

In an interview with *New Vision*, Aceng criticised the doctors on strike.

"Medical work is a calling. There is no doctor who can sit comfortably and watch people die. Those who are striking were not called spiritually to serve. They do not have the interests of people at heart," she said.

Aceng argued that the

situation is not as bad as portrayed by the media.

At Kyenjojo government hospital, the strike has left over 400 HIV/AIDS patients stranded unable to access anti-retroviral drugs.

Gloria Kusemererwa, a resident of Katooke who has been accessing ARVs from the hospital, said many people living with HIV/AIDS are unable to access ARVs due to the strike.

Kasita Mwesige, another patient, said he has spent three days at the hospital without seeing any doctor and he has not received the drugs.

Albert Byamukama, a nursing assistant who was attending to patients, said they are finding it hard to treat people without doctors.

"We don't have doctors. They come and only hung around and they go back to their homes," he said.

Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the Uganda Medical Association (UMA) president told *New Vision* that only doctors were initially supposed to be on strike.

"Other cadres such as clinicians, paramedics, technicians and pharmacist are taking advantage of our strike. We had not included them in the plan, but they have also decided not to work. This shows doctors are the natural leaders in the health centres," Obuku said, adding: "Our plan was to include other health workers at a later stage. Let them work. We shall involve them later when talks fail."

Story compiled by Paul Kiuuwa, Carol Kasujja Wilson Asilimwe and George Bitu