

Strike

Police

UPDF

Doctors

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Govt agrees to demands by striking doctors

The Government and striking doctors have made significant progress towards resolving their pay dispute, *New Vision* has learnt.

Prime Minister Dr Ruhakana Rugunda said: "Progress has been made on many issues and we expect that the industrial action will end soon."

Rugunda declined to divulge more details on the matter, but added that the Government and the leaders of the Uganda Medical Association (UMA) have held a series of meetings, during which a number of issues have been resolved.

He said even yesterday, they held a meeting with UMA leaders.

A special cabinet committee, instituted last week to engage doctors in talks aimed at ending their strike, yesterday presented its report to Cabinet according to the Prime Minister.

David Bahati, the state minister for planning and a member of the special committee, said: "Given the mediation that has transpired between both parties, we see the strike ending soon."

"We have made progress with the doctors and are confident that we shall see them return to work as soon as possible."

New Vision has learnt that UMA leaders met last night to come up with a common position on what the Government is offering. But sources said the leaders could not reach a consensus.

Sources said UMA leaders were expected to call the general assembly tomorrow to decide on whether to end their industrial action or not.

One of the top leaders of UMA also confirmed that progress has been made in their talks with the Government. But he said the decision to call off the strike rests with the UMA general assembly.

"The strike was called by the general assembly and it is that very general assembly that will end it."

"However, we have made



UPDF Cap. Dr Gideon Nuwagaba (left) and Pte. Dr Ronald Oboth attending to a patient in the ward of Kiruddu Hospital in Kampala district yesterday. UPDF photo

significant progress on all the issues we tabled," the official, who declined to be identified, said.

"The UMA leadership now has to meet and harmonise the outcome of the different consultative meetings held so far."

"It also has to convince the general assembly that what has been discussed tantamount to an answer to their grievances either in the short or long-term," the official explained.

But sources both within the Government and UMA said one unresolved key issue is the doctors' demand for

Government to make a written commitment on whatever has been agreed upon.

"We want the Government to give an undertaking in writing what it will pay the doctors, in figures. We want the time frame in which it will implement what has been agreed on. We want something which is enforceable," the official explained, adding that without a written undertaking, it may be difficult for the UMA leaders to convince members to end the industrial action.

Cabinet was reluctant to make any written undertaking that could be basis for future

legal action by the doctors.

Sources said Cabinet also needed to consult the President on the matter since he did not attend the meeting yesterday.

Efforts to get comments from Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of UMA, last evening were futile.

The doctors went on strike on November 6, demanding improvement of their working conditions and better facilities.

President Yoweri Museveni last week warned that the striking medics risked losing their public service jobs if they fail to return to work.

Demands

As a stop gap measure, the Government has asked the Police, UPDF and Prisons to deploy their medical personnel at public health facilities affected by the strike.

Consequently, the Police have opened their 92 health facilities to the public, while the army has deployed some of its doctors to major hospitals such as Kiruddu and Kawempe in Kampala.

"The army has sent the wanainchi, some of its highly qualified doctors that have been instrumental in saving lives of soldiers and civilians

in many operational areas," Richard Karemiri, the army spokesperson, said in a press statement yesterday.

The army deployment is coordinated by Col Dr Stephen Kusasira, the director of Medical Services. Some of the doctors deployed include Ronald Oboth, Gideon Nuwagira and Patrick Otim.

Dr Moses Byaruhanga, the director Police health services, said the force had enough doctors to handle the increasing number of patients in their clinics.

He said at Nsambya Police barracks clinic, a total of 700 patients are registered daily compared to the 400 they used to get.

HIV experts constrained

Meanwhile activists under the National Forum of People Living With HIV/AIDS also expressed concern over the ongoing strike by the doctors.

"The medical workers on strike and shortage of ARVs pauses a crisis and a public health disaster in the country. We want the Speaker of Parliament to convene a special sitting to address the doctors demands," Stella Kentutsi, the executive director of the forum, said.

Parliament to intervene

Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga, while meeting with Sylvia Namabide, the executive director of Health Plus, a local non-governmental organisation, yesterday promised that Parliament would intervene in the issue when it resumes its sittings this week.

Medical students

The medical students have also called for their upcoming examinations to be postponed, saying the strike by doctors has greatly affected them, given that they depend on the public hospitals for their class work.

The students met Prof. Moses Kanya, the dean of the School of Medicine at Makerere University over the matter yesterday. They are scheduled to start their final exams on December 4.