

Doctors, govt clash over Cuban medics

BY JOHN SEMAKULA

The backlash over the Government's move to import Cuban doctors has continued with local doctors arguing that it is a nonstarter, while Government insists it is the right direction.

Government announced recently that it would employ 200 Cuban doctors in up-country health facilities, where patients cannot access specialists.

In an exclusive interview with *Saturday Vision* on Friday, Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of the Uganda Medical Association (UMA), asked Government to re-examine its plan.

"We produce 600 doctors and specialists annually. Does the Government want to deny local doctors a chance to work in their country?" Obuku asked.

But the Government spokesperson, Ofwono Opondo, described the people 'making noise' against the importation of Cuban doctors as opportunists and diversionary.

Describing the plan as a "stop gap measure" to deal with a serious problem, Opondo noted that importing Cuban doctors is equivalent to securing a grant from the country.

"In 1987, when President Yoweri Museveni came to power and found that most of the experts had run out of the country, he visited Cuba and President Castro offered him 100 doctors to come and work in Uganda for 10 years, without pay," Opondo said. "But the President asked him to convert the offer into a grant and that is how Mbarara University of Science

and Technology was started using the grant."

Opondo also calmed fears that the Cuban doctors would not be able to operate in health facilities without good accommodation and running water, arguing that, their training enables them to work and survive in any part of the country.

"The Cuban doctors work like boy-scouts and soldiers. They do not need mattresses and running water, like the medical graduates from Makerere and other universities," he said.

Asked why Government would pay Cubans better salaries than Ugandans, Opondo said he was sure their Government would provide most of the requirements, including insurance.

He also explained that the Government was not giving up on the Ugandan doctors and it is the reason increasing their salaries has been prioritised in next financial year's budget.

Meanwhile, Obuku said they have decided to engage Government to understand what informed the decision.

There were also reports that doctors were planning to run to court to stop Government from executing the plan. However, UMA and Uganda Medical and Dental Practitioners Council denied it.

Obuku said "We are planning to do a lot in response, although, we would first of all want to help Government come up with a policy option that addresses the gaps preventing local doctors from accepting to work in up-country facilities."



Ekwaro Obuku

DR EKWARO OBUKU



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He said accommodation was one of the biggest challenges that Cuban medics will also encounter.

According to Government, each Cuban doctor will be paid \$1,500 per month, which is roughly sh5.4m. Local doctors earn between sh1m and sh4.5m, depending on experience and specialisation.

Giving Cuban doctors a better pay than Ugandans is one of the other points of concern. The local doctors say it is an unfair move when government is promoting "buy Uganda, build Uganda".

Earlier, when he was asked whether Cuban doctors can replace local doctors, Obuku said foreign experts will never fit in the shoes of the locals.

Cuba has a policy of sending its doctors to other countries in a

bid to promote diplomacy. In 2016, the country sent doctors to Brazil, to fill a gap in the country's crippling health sector, but the move sparked off protests from locals and doctors under the Brazilian Medical Association.

The association went ahead to file a lawsuit in the country's Supreme Court, challenging the move. The local doctors and Brazilians who protested against the move said it was a temporary solution to fix a systematic problem. But despite the court petition, Brazil still went on and imported thousands of Cuban doctors to work under contracts with the Cuban authorities.

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