

Nurses, govt lock horns over strike

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KAMPALA. A crisis has once again hit the Ministry of Health following yesterday's announcement of a countrywide strike by midwives and nurses who make the backbone of the health providers.

The strike was announced last night by a section of nurses following failure by the government to meet their 400 per cent salary increment request, a demand they had issued a week ago.

"So many nurses and midwives have died, so many have retired and left the profession because of poor working conditions," Ms Jolly Avako, a midwife at Mulago hospital, said yesterday.

"The workload is too much. We do most of the work on behalf of the doctors. We will start our professional (industrial) action at midnight, that is when maybe government will listen to us," Ms Avako added.

A source in the Health ministry put the number of nurses and midwives at 23,000.

At the beginning of doctors' strike, a section of midwives and nurses shunned the strike and were party to the suit brought by the National Organisation of Trade Unions against the striking doctors last month.

But Ms Avako said that the alleged health workers retired from the profession long time ago

and the serving nurses were surprised that they purported to represent them.

In a letter to the government last month signed by Mr Paul Henry Bukunya, the nurses and midwives union's secretary general, demanded that government raises their salary by 400 per cent.

By yesterday evening, three union negotiators; Mr Justus Cherop, the chairperson, Mr Bukunya and Ms Annet Birungi had not met the health workers at 5pm as they had agreed before heading to Parliament to meet "Cabinet ministers" causing fear that they could be under arrest.

Efforts to reach them were futile as they could not reply our calls to their known numbers.

The Ministry of Health permanent secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, did not answer our calls when we sought a comment on the new crisis.

Asked if their strike will not result into death of patients, Ms Carl Aluka, a pregnant nurse, said: "Do you only mind about the lives of patients and not health providers? We cannot afford treatment also. We do not have insurance and pay as others while in hospitals whenever we are sick."

DEMAND

The 400 per cent increment would mean that the lowest paid nurse will earn Shs2.5m up from Shs470,000.