

Medics stay away in city hospitals as upcountry counterparts work

Their stand. Some upcountry doctors say they cannot let innocent people lose their lives because of the strike.

BY LILIAN NAMAGEMBE
Lnamagembe@ug.nationmedia.com

Doctors across the country are presenting mixed responses to the directive that they resume work forthwith after the government declared their ongoing strike illegal. The Health minister, Dr Ruth Aceng, who addressed a hastily organised emergency press conference at the ministry's headquarters, on Thursday had said all health workers who would follow the order would not be subjected to any disciplinary action.

In Kampala, the doctors have continued to stay away, with patients in critical condition at Kirusu Hospital, where the internal medicine department of Mulago Hospital has temporarily shifted left, unattended.

President Museveni on Thursday night directed Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) to roll call doctors and health workers on duty at all health facilities across the country starting today.

Positive response

And this directive seems to be working in health facilities upcountry, including in Mbarara, Mpigi, Kalangala, Lamwo, Nwoya and Hoima, with doctors and nurses turning up to attend to children, expectant mothers and emergency cases such as accidents.

But the Uganda Medical Association (UMA) president on Friday dismissed the directive, with their president Dr Ekwaro Obuku, saying: "Our legitimacy has been tested and the strike is still on until we meet the President on November 17."

By 9am on Saturday morning, Kirusu Hospital's Ward 5A, where female patients with breathing difficulties are treated, had only a few patients with their caretakers fumbling with fixing nasal cannulas, something that is ordinarily done by nurses who were also nowhere to be seen.

"The doctor just came around last night to check on the patients and to administer drugs and left," one of the female patients said.

Another elderly woman in the same ward said: "Even when my daughter would need constant monitoring from the doctor, I have not seen any of them. Not even a nurse."

Only a few security personnel were seen moving around the wards, as cleaners at the hospital kept washing doors and windows of the locked pharmacies, laboratories and consultation rooms.

The waiting rooms for outpatients also remained empty as patients stayed away with no hope of seeing



Stranded. Patients at the out-patient department of Kisenyi Health Centre IV in Kampala. Many patients have been left unattended following a medical workers strike. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

any doctor.

The hospital appeared abandoned. Only a handful of doctors were seen around the hospital's private wing where patients pay for services.

The same situation was seen at Mulago Hospital on Thursday evening with a handful of doctors and nurses attending to accident victims at the casualty ward. Other areas where out-patient clinics are conducted also remained locked with no attendants in sight.

Dr Obuku said UMA had asked the nearly 500 doctors countrywide not to withdraw all services completely, but retain emergency services given that the patients are their core responsibility.

But Dr Aceng insisted that all doctors and intern doctors must resume work at once. She also directed UMA officials to stop interfering with the association members willing to work.

Dr Aceng promised protection



Health minister Ruth Aceng

for doctors who get back to work, adding that intern doctors who fail to comply will have their internships terminated and will be required to reapply.

In an eight-point terse statement

read at the press conference, Dr Aceng said the doctors never gave the formal 90-day notice required and also did not follow the public service procedure in declaring industrial action.

She says grievances about salary and working condition by public officials should have been channelled through the Public Service Negotiation and Consultation Council.

This, she says, is the guidance by the Solicitor General, the technical arm of the Attorney General, the government chief legal adviser.

Dr Aceng accepted that the doctors' concerns as "genuine".

Additional reporting by
Cissy Makumbi, Felix Ainebyoona,
Sadat Mbogo, Moses Mulya,
Henry Lubulwa,
Francis Mugerwa, Ronald Seebe, Fred
Wambede, Ezekiel Sekwema,
Emmanuel Ainebyoona

Voices



"I have visited the wards and found that patients on admission have been receiving their medications. Even our attendance books suggest that out staff have been turning up for duty."

DR NATHAN ONYACHI, MEDICAL SUPERINTENDENT FOR MADAKA REGIONAL REFERRAL HOSPITAL



"It is business as usual. The doctors in Kalangala have not laid down their tools because of the nature of our district, hard-to-reach and islands are widely apart besides the vulnerability of the population. Emergencies, including caesarian sections, ruptured uterus repair and many others have been done at the health centre since Monday."

DR MICHAEL SSIIMU, OFFICER-IN-CHARGE OF KALANGALA HEALTH CENTRE IV

"I am receiving reports in Mpigi that my medical workers are disciplined; they did not participate in the strike."

SWAIRU LUBEGA NAWA, MPIGI RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"Well, they are offering the services. It is not that they do not feel the pinch; they do and they also support their colleagues who are striking, but they are saying they cannot abandon innocent lives yet they can help."

JONATHAN RUTABINGWA, LAMWO RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"I am at the health centre right now with my staff. We are doing what we are supposed to do."

DR EMMANUEL NANYUMBA, OFFICER-IN-CHARGE OF BUTOLO HEALTH CENTRE III

"They (doctors) are within the hospital premises and helping with emergencies."

RICHARD ONKALIT, DISTRICT INTERNAL SECURITY OFFICER FOR NWOYA



"They are working but handling emergencies such as accidents, taking expectant mothers to theatre, treating children and critically ill people. According to media reports people know that doctors are on strike, so patients' numbers are reducing across but we need to reassure the public that health services are available at the hospital."

DR SIMON KASIBANTE, OFFICER-IN-CHARGE OF SEMBABULE HEALTH CENTRE

"The doctor is on duty with the help of other medical officers"

JALMOL BILAK, AMURU RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"For us in Namutumba we are not affected because we have one doctor in the whole district. We kindly requested him not to go on strike and he understood us. He is busy doing the operations."

MADDI ELEJJA, NAMUTUMBA RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"We are working in order to help our people. I do not think we should punish them. But we lack many things as medical workers and are most pained by the very little salary."

DR JUBILEE ABWOL, OFFICER-IN-CHARGE OF MPIGI HEALTH CENTRE IV

Voices

"I moved around Jinja Referral Hospital yesterday (Friday) and found them (doctors) working. I don't know if they were pretending to be working, but they seemed to be working; the maternity and children's wards were functional."

PETER KEN LOCAP, JINJA RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"We are not affected by the strike. Our staff are attending to all cases at the hospital and no patient is stranded."

DR EMMANUEL TUGAINEYO, DIRECTOR-MBALE REFERRAL HOSPITAL

"A few doctors turn up to attend to children, expectant mothers and other patients with emergencies, especially those that require operation."

EREAZER MUGISA, PRINCIPAL ADMINISTRATOR AT HOIMA REGIONAL REFERRAL HOSPITAL

"I have compiled my brief and I will soon call a press conference."

JOHN STEPHEN EKOOM, HOIMA RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

"Being that this is the biggest public health facility, we had to deal with emergencies, three mothers underwent C-section."

DR SIMON KASIBANTE, OFFICER-IN-CHARGE OF SEMBABULE HEALTH CENTRE

"For us in Namutumba we are not affected because we have one doctor in the whole district. We kindly requested him not to go on strike and he understood us. He is busy doing the operations."

MADDI ELEJJA, NAMUTUMBA RESIDENT DISTRICT COMMISSIONER