Strike | Bargain | Rescue

Medics trickle back to work, UPDF to deploy in hospitals

By Vision Reporters

Patients are still stranded at the major hospitals of Mulago, Kiruddu, Naguru and Kawempe after over 6,000 specialists joined the ongoing health workers' industrial action. The strike entered the 11th day yesterday.

Despite the Government's announcement that the army had been called upon to cover the gap as negotiations with medics to find a compromise continue, there were not any UPDF medics at the four major health centres in Kampala.

Brig. Richard Karemire, the UPDF spokesperson, said army medics "will be in place as soon as logistics (to facilitate them) are in place". But he did not say exactly when.

Karemire would also not confirm the number of army officers who have some medical background, and only said: "We have enough (army doctors) to handle the UPDF. But we are patriotic enough to share whatever we have with the *wananchi* to save the lives of Ugandans."

At Kawempe Hospital, expectant mothers made long queues despite the fact there were no midwives attending to them. Kiruddu Hospital was almost empty.

A source at Kawempe Hospital said they heard of the planned deployment of military doctors through the media and would gladly welcome them, but they "are nowhere to be seen".

"We have been handling emergencies ourselves, no army officer has joined us," said an administrator at the facility.

"The only deployment at the hospital by men in uniform are the five Police officers who are manning the gate to ensure security," the source said.

When *New Vision* visited Mulago Hospital, specifically at the accident and emergency unit, a few nurses who were on duty and some intern doctors said they had not seen any army medic.

"Those are rumours. We have no new personnel here. Maybe they were deployed at other facilities or departments, but not here at the emergency unit," a nurse said.

Dr Baterana Byarugaba, the Mulago Hospital executive director, said he was not aware that the UPDF were to be deployed at the facility, but said they would be welcome if they "come to our rescue".

Byarugaba said intern doctors were also not on the wards, but there were some doctors who were handling emergency cases.

He said only 10 doctors, consultants and postgraduate students were present at the country's national referral when we visited.

However, some doctors at Katakwi Hospital, Gulu Hospital and Anaka Hospital in Nwoya district have reportedly returned to work.

"We have to save people's lives. We are not part of the strike," said Dr David Bilimanya, the principal administrator for Gulu Hospital.

Dr Emmanuel Abino of Katakwi Hospital said they have returned to work with zero morale, but they have to save people's lives.

Some people *New Vision* talked to were also critical of the move to deploy the army at the facilities.

Grace Kajuna, from Kampala, said: "Government needs to expedite the talks with doctors so that they return to hospitals. Deploying army medics is just a temporary solution. How many are they (army medics)? And how many health facilities are in the county?"

Efforts to reach health minister Dr Jane Ruth Aceng yesterday were futile.

Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of the Uganda Medical Association that is leading the sit-down strike, maintained the stand on the industrial action, but called on the doctors to continue to give emergency services.

"The thing people do not realise is that we are fighting for more than just salaries. We are tired of seeing patients die because of lack of simple necessities and equipment.

"We are happy that our junior house officers have agreed to go back and work as they continue learning. We are also requesting intern doctors to continue handling emergency so that they learn," Obuku said.

Compiled by Violet Nabatanzi Juliet



Patients wait in line at Mulago Hospital, Kawempe yesterday. There are a few doctors on duty. Photo by Roderick Ahimbazwe

DOCTORS' DEMANDS

The doctors want their salaries enhanced. They want modern staff quarters and vehicles. One of the key demands is that the monthly salary of a senior consultant be increased from sh3.4m to sh35m and be given a five-bedroomed house, a 4000cc vehicle and three domestic workers.

The doctors also proposed salary of sh17m for senior officers (doctors pursuing master's degrees) and lecturers. And they want a review of duty facilitation, lifting of the ban on recruitment of doctors and streamlining of the internship programme.

Other demands include setting up of a loan scheme for medics, where they can borrow money at 3%-5% interest.

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