

Govt prepares written pledge for doctors' welfare

By Cecilia Okoth

After a series of meetings with the striking doctors, the Government yesterday prepared a written obligation for medics improved welfare, as a bargaining chip to end their 17-day strike that had hampered services in major public health facilities across the country.

Health minister Dr Jane Ruth Aceng yesterday told *New Vision* that the commitment from the finance ministry, was handed over to representatives of Uganda Medical Association (UMA) late in the afternoon.

However by press time, Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of UMA the body that is leading the strike, said the association had not yet received any document to that effect.

A special Cabinet committee instituted last week to engage doctors in talks aimed at ending their strike on Monday presented its report to Cabinet, according to the David Bahati,

the state minister for planning.

Although significant strides between the special committee and the striking doctors were made towards resolving their pay disputes, the doctors under their association insisted that they would end the strike only if they received a written commitment.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

■ Doctors want intern doctors and senior house officers recognised in the public service structure and remunerated and duty facilitating allowances and non-practice allowance.

"As soon as we get signed resolutions of the meeting we held with Government, or a letter of commitment, whatever it is government wants to put, we will then have a basis to call for an extra-ordinary general assembly, then go through the motions and thereafter

cast a vote on whether to continue, suspend or call off the industrial action," Obuku said in an interview yesterday.

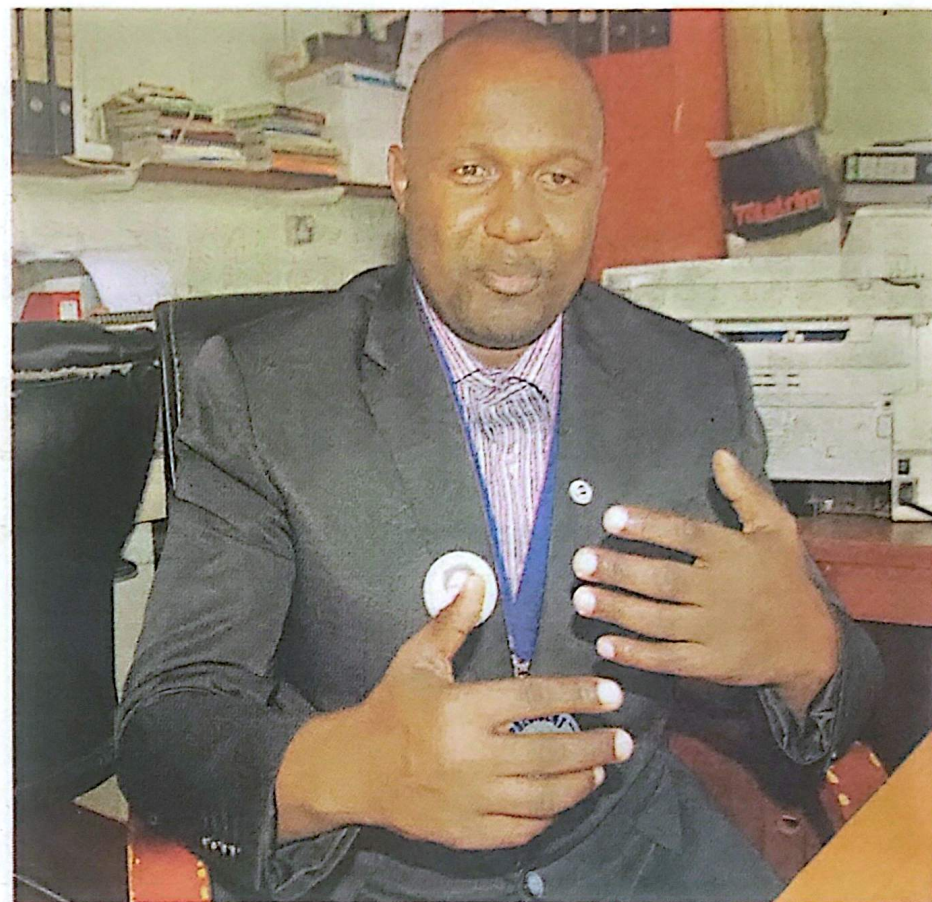
The doctors went on strike on November 6, demanding improvement of their working conditions and better facilities.

Doctors' demands

However, having discussed all the minimum irreducible demands in a series of meetings with government officials, medics' listed the most urgent needs they want government to put in place to better their working conditions.

They include supplementary for medicines and sundries/safety, disbanding or restructuring the Health Monitoring Unit and strengthening the Uganda Medical and Dental Practitioners Council established by an Act of Parliament.

They also want intern doctors and senior house officers recognised in the public service structure and remunerated and



Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the president of UMA during an interview with *New Vision* at the Medical Institute Mulago in Kampala yesterday. Photo by Ramadhan Abbey

duty facilitating allowances and non-practice allowance for all doctors in public service.

"Non-practice allowance for instance is the money you would pay a doctor to ensure he or she does not work elsewhere. Whereas there is an informal policy of dual practice that allows doctors to work both in private and public

hospitals, this only creates competition and conflict of interest or deliberate referrals of patients from public to private clinics to make money," Obuku explained.

In the long-run, the doctors want the total health care system reformed through undertaking innovative financing mechanisms (a mix

of a national health insurance scheme, tax based financing and modified cost sharing with equalisation funds to promote equity and solidarity).

They also want the position of the human capital development commissioner re-established to look at human capital development as a whole.