

THE BIG QUESTIONS

With a promise of attractive salaries, many Ugandan health workers have been lured into applying for jobs in war-torn Libya. Caroline Ariba explores the implications of the move

Look before you leap to that job abroad

She does not want her name mentioned because she still has hope. It revolves around an advert about jobs in Libya for health workers. The salary, which could be anything between sh5m to sh7m, is too big an offer to resist. She did the interviews in May and swears that the wait is no mean feat.

"I am going crazy. With every phone call, my heart skips a beat," Sheila (not real name) laments. "When I call them to ask, they only tell me to wait."

The recruiting firm, Middle East Consultants, collected over sh200,000 from each interviewee and said they would be in touch, but have not done so yet.

Sheila, who works at her mother's drugshop for a paltry sh80,000 per month, says the job in Benghazi Medical Centre, in war-ravaged Libya, is her hope, after many failed attempts to get employment.

"People have told me that Libya is not a safe country, but I am as good as dead without employment," she says.

What troubles her most is that she has to pay the person who lent her the money for the interview.

"I got sh600,000 from my neighbour to pay interview fees and to process my passport," she says. "When I called the office, the woman said I should learn to be patient."

Unlike Sheila who is still hopeful, Anthony Kagurusi, a technician with Tropical Electronic Solutions, has lost all hope.

"I applied in November for a job with Qatar Airways, but they only got back to me in March." Like Sheila, he had applied with Middle East Consultants and had been told to wait.

"They keep telling me that they will call me if anything comes up," Kagurusi says.

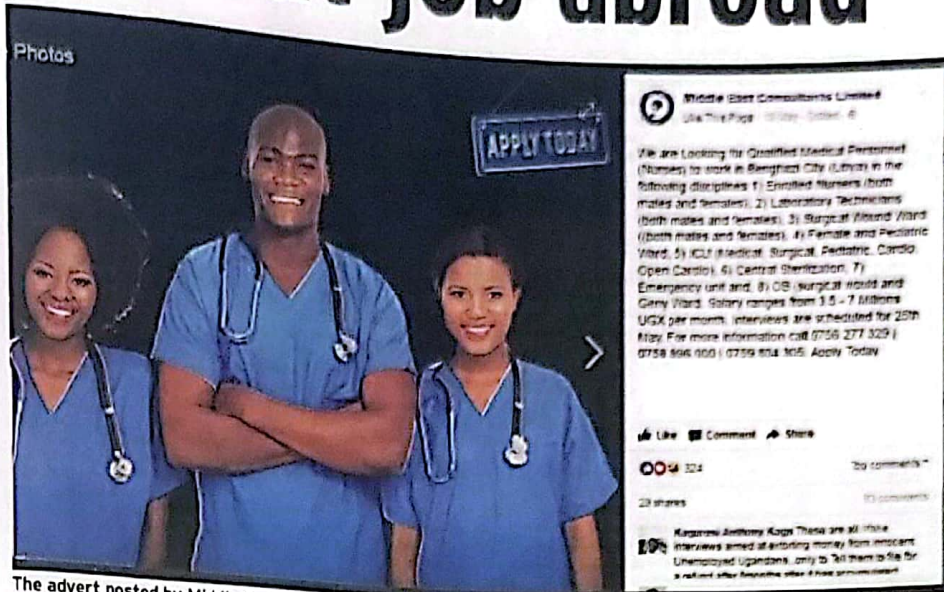
Who is fooling who?

The complaints were endless, as many took to the Middle East Consultants page on Facebook to lament about the labour exportation firm's silence.

However, when New Vision contacted Gordon Mugenyi, the firm's director, he said: "We are not new in this business. We have been taking people to Abu Dhabi and many other places in the Middle East."

Mugenyi argues that those who applied for the jobs in Libya paid sh210,000 each and about half of it will be for medical tests in Kibuli Hospital.

Asked why the firm had delayed to respond



The advert posted by Middle East Consultants calling for medics to work in Libya



A case of brain drain

Besides the security question, experts worry that exporting health workers to Libya is a case of brain drain, coming at a time when Uganda does not have enough health workers.

Was it not just a month ago that a one Major Frederick Kawuki, a resident of Kitebi in Rubaga South, allegedly died upon reaching Mulago because all the doctors supposed to operate on him had gone abroad? Wafrika asks.

Wafrika argues that it is strategically wrong and against national interest to export the doctors.

"According to UN reports, it is estimated that in Uganda, there is one doctor per 24,000 patients. This is far below the required international standards under the Millennium Development Goals targets."

He accused the labour ministry for failing to place relevant guidelines to regulate the exportation of workers.

However, Dr Anthony Mbonye, the director of health services is in support of health workers going abroad.

"Every year, our training institutes release about 1,000 health workers who cannot be absorbed in our medical facilities," he says. "I would rather see the health workers taken to practise their profession than languish here."

Asia Russel, the managing director of Health Global Access Project, agrees with Mbonye. She says the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief paid for the training of 1,695 health workers who have not yet been absorbed.

"Then medical doctors have now graduated and could be lost to other countries, unless the Government employs them," she says.

to interviewees, Mugenyi responded: "Do you know the meaning of interviews? It means you will either get the job or you will not!"

He said the money paid for interviews is non-refundable.

"We tell them (interviewees) that the money is non-refundable before they pay. I do not see why this should be a problem."

He, however, said it is only the health workers who will get a refund, if they do not get the jobs.

Mugenyi refused to disclose the number of people who had applied for the jobs.

Asked why the health workers were not in Libya by now, Mugenyi said he was still waiting for clearance from the labour ministry.

"There is a process and we follow it," he said. "Before we take any one to these countries, the labour ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must clear us."

Asked why they advertise the jobs, take money and do interviews before clearance, he lashed out, asking if he was under interrogation.

In a Facebook chat, New

Vision asked a young woman (name withheld) who has just returned from Libya if there were jobs there. She replied: "No more jobs, please!"

Also, in a thread on Facebook, the same woman warned people about Libya's unpredictability.

While the labour ministry says they are aware of the recruitment drive for medical

workers to go to Libya, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has distanced itself from the project, saying no company had approached them about it.

The foreign affairs ministry has warned that those travelling to the war-torn country do so at their own risk and should not expect any consular support.

"If somebody had approached me about this, I would be aware, but I am just learning from you," Patrick Mugonyi, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said.

"We would want our people to be safe. But without a consulate in Libya looking out for Ugandans, who will protect them?" Mugonyi asked.

Concerns

Martin Wandera, the director of Labour at the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Affairs, says they know about the move to take health workers to Libya.

"As a ministry responsible for the externalisation of labour, our work is to facilitate anyone looking for work abroad," he said.

"We work with other agencies and the ministries of foreign affairs in the countries where Ugandans are seeking employment to ensure that they are well."

He, however, said this would be the first time Uganda is sending labour to Libya, a country in turmoil.

However, while speaking to South Africa's *Mail and Guardian*, Margaret Kafeero, the head of public diplomacy at Uganda's foreign ministry, insists that the arrangement between Middle East Consultants and the hospital in Libya was a private one.

"Libya is going through a period of strife and we warn any individuals who go there that we may not be able to offer adequate consular protection in case of any eventualities," she told *Mail and Guardian*, adding that Uganda had no diplomatic representation in Libya.

Asked why even in states where the country has representation, Ugandans have been tortured, Wandera countered: "Aren't there housemaids who are tortured in Kampala?"

He argues that such incidences are isolated and many of them are because the victims go through recruitment agencies that are not registered.

Mayambala Wafrika, the chairperson of Worldwide African Congress, says it is inhumane to take people to work in Libya, a war-torn country, with no government protection.

"Who will be held accountable if a missile destroys the hospital in Benghazi where our doctors are to be taken?" he asks.