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Sigh of relief as Shs2.7b cancer machine arrives

BY EMMANUEL AINESYOONA

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KAMPALA: After almost two agonising years of waiting, cancer patients will breathe a sigh of relief after the new radiotherapy machine arrived into the country this week.

It was shipped from Czech Republic through Mombasa port with guidance of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a United Nations body that regulates use of nuclear and atomic energy.

Purchased at 642,000 euros (more than Shs2.7b) by both government and IAEA, the machine replaces the old cobalt 60 radiotherapy machine, which broke down beyond repair on March 27, 2016, leaving about 2,000 patients without proper treatment and some people died in the process.

In the absence of a cobalt 60 radiotherapy machine, the patients in the country were advised to travel to Nairobi, Kenya for treatment. Others were changed to chemotherapy, surgery and palliative care.

The broken machine was donated to Uganda by the Chinese authorities in 1995. It's expected to be shipped back to China.

The Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) director, Dr Jackson Orem told *Sunday Monitor* on Friday that "the new machine has finally arrived in Kampala."

"The machine is in a warehouse somewhere in Kampala, a container containing its parts will be delivered to UCI on Wednesday and installation is expected to last at least one month," Dr Orem said.

Dr Orem also disclosed that the radioactive source, which is a sensitive component of the machine, has already arrived at Entebbe International Airport.

Due the sensitivity of the source, the National Atomic Council has already worked out a plan of transporting the nuclear component to Kampala under tight security.

The government had initially promised to deliver and install the Cobalt 60 machine within six months after the old out broke down beyond repair. The deadline was moved to December 2016, shifted to February 2017, then back to April and May 2017.

Dr Orem explained that it has been an uphill task to fast track the procurement of the machine due to policy divergence and other factors like changes in the political and technical leadership at the Ministry of Health.

"At the beginning, we were planning to have the machine decommissioned early enough [but] we were told there was no money. We were [then] advised to live within our budget," Dr Orem said as he explained the delays in restoration of radiotherapy services at UCI.

He added that lack of money compelled UCI to continue using the old machine until it broke down beyond repair.

"When the crisis came, the guns were turned onto the UCI but as the institute draw the plan on how things would be done. There was disagreement at the level with some people pushing