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Doctors ignore calls not to strike

Except for emergency cases, doctors in public health facilities have vowed not to treat any patient until they call off a strike they declared yesterday in disregard to government and their union bosses' advice.

The Uganda Medical Association (UMA) made the decision at an extraordinary annual general assembly held at Makerere University College of Health Sciences in Mulago, Kampala yesterday.

During the meeting, the doctors booed the Prime Minister, Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, and the state minister for health in charge of general duties, Sarah Opendi, when they stood up to explain how far the Government had gone in to address their concerns, which doctors referred to as 'hot air'.

Over the weekend, the Uganda medical workers and the nursing and midwifery

unions had also urged medical practitioners not to strike, saying it would be counter productive since negotiations with Government are underway.

UMA brings together over 6,000 doctors both in public and private health facilities. They want the Government to increase salaries and duty allowances of health professionals, review the supply chain and management of medicines, vaccines and medical supplies, as well as disband the State House Medicines and Health Service Delivery Monitoring Unit.

The association wants a nurse/midwife, the lowest paid medic, to earn sh6.5m a month, up from sh350,000, in addition to a one to three-bedroomed house, a 2,500cc vehicle and one domestic worker.

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salary of a senior consultant, the highest paid medical worker, increased from sh3.4m to sh35m and given a five-bedroomed house, a 4,000cc vehicle and three domestic workers.

They also proposed sh17m for senior house officers and lecturers. Senior house officers are doctors pursuing master's degree and who currently are not paid since they are regarded as students.

Dr Ekwaro Obuku, the UMA president said: "We took the oath to serve not to live in poverty. We are not going to work until the Government fulfils its promises."

Dr Mukuzi Muhereza, the UMA secretary general issued guidelines which all doctors are going to follow during the industrial action. They will only handle emergencies for expectant mothers, children with respiratory issues and accident victims.

"This decision comes after several failed negotiations with the Government," he stated.

Efforts by Rugunda to convince doctors to call off the strike on deaf ears.

"We will suspend the strike as the Government comes up with more equitable ways of handling salaries, putting in mind that there are other civil servants that must be considered," Rugunda said.

Addressing a rowdy crowd, Opendi said this financial year, the health ministry received sh4.4b for senior consultants, but they waited for the full list of all consultants to distribute the money.

"We received the money and wrote to universities. So far, only three universities have submitted their lists. Those who have submitted the payment process has started. We also received sh9.3b for 1,045 interns, but the more interns we get; the less money received. Interns should be patient till the next financial year," Opendi noted.

Dr Byarugaba Baterana, the Mulago Hospital executive director, assured the public that not all doctors will be on strike and they will manage the situation.