

Zimbabwe sacks 16,000 striking nurses, as Uganda nurses threaten strike

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The government of Zimbabwe sacked 16,000 nurses employed at public hospitals Tuesday, after they went on strike the previous day to demand higher pay and better conditions. The striking nurses belong to the Zimbabwe Nurses Association (ZINA) union.

The walkout comes as part of growing social unrest in the country and follows a month-long walkout by doctors, who struck over similar demands. The government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa has faced growing popular opposition since coming to power after a military coup removed long-time president Robert Mugabe late last year.

In summarily firing the striking nurses, the government is seeking to stop growing social unrest from escalating before the July 2018 elections. There is a deep-seated fear among Zimbabwe's ruling elite over the eruption of mass social unrest, which could threaten their rule.

While patients were turned away from hospitals and clinics after the strike began on Monday, striking nurses set up an impromptu clinic during a demonstration outside of parliament, with the offer of free treatment to the public.

Speaking to the media regarding the provision of free treatment, Pretty Mugudza, a nurse at Central Hospital in the capital city Harare said, "We are doing this to show that we are for the people. All we are asking for are better working conditions. We can't be looking at patients dying in hospitals because we have no resources."

The state of public hospitals in the country is indeed horrific. The doctor-to-patient ratio in the country is an unprecedented 1 doctor for every 12,000 residents, in contrast to the United Nations recommended standard of 1 for every 200. Many Zimbabweans die from treatable diseases, even after admission for treatment at

clinics or hospitals.

Hospitals frequently lack supplies, including medicines. Essential equipment, such as x-ray machines, are either obsolete, broken, or nonexistent in many clinics across the country. In rural areas, where the majority of Zimbabweans reside, most have no access to health care at all and must travel to cities for treatment.

Tapfumaneyi Gubede, a resident of Mutoko, told the Voice of America in 2016 of the dire state of health care many rural residents experience. "Another problem is the failure to acquire drugs. People pay a \$5 fee for cards at clinics but there are no drugs. The clinic just writes a prescription and you are supposed to purchase the drugs from a pharmacy. Most people die because they do not have money."

After his government sacked 16,000 poorly paid nurses, Vice President Chiwenga cynically claimed to have the health and well-being of Zimbabweans in mind. "Government has decided in the interest of patients and of saving lives to discharge all the striking nurses with immediate effect."

Chiwenga declared that unemployed and retired nurses would replace those who have sacked. He further denounced the nurses' actions as deplorable and reprehensible, coming after the government allocated a paltry \$17 million in funding for nurses' salaries. Distributed evenly among the 16,000 sacked nurses, the new funding equates to less than \$3 per day per nurse and would do next to nothing to improve the deteriorating state of Zimbabwe's public hospitals.

In a betrayal of the striking nurses, on Sunday ZINA called an end to the strike and instructed nurses to return to work on Monday, even after the government remained firm that striking nurses were to be replaced. While the cessation of the strike brought no agreement

for better pay or conditions, ZINA told striking nurses of the union's plan to file a lawsuit against the government. Such a maneuver is a dead end for the nurses and will do nothing to guarantee better wages or working conditions.

Uganda nurses and midwives threaten walkout over poor salary, working conditions

On April 15, nurses and midwives employed at public hospitals and clinics across Uganda threatened to strike if salary increases agreed to with the government in November were not enacted. The proposal for salary increases from 400,000 to 1 million Uganda shillings (or from \$110 to \$270) for entry-level nurses and midwives was negotiated between the Uganda Nurses and Midwives Union (UNMU) and President Yoweri Museveni last November.

The UNMU has rejected the government's new salary structure for nurses and midwives for the 2018 fiscal year, stating that it falls far short of the agreement. The union threatened a walkout if the government did not table immediate negotiations to address the nurses' and midwives' demands.

Chairman General Wilson Owere Usher of the National Organization of Trade Unions (NOTU), to which the UNMU is affiliated, stated, "We are warning [Minister of Finance David] Bahati. If he insists we shall camp in Kabale. Government has the money and we know where the money is. When politicians need money, it is released in two hours, but when it's workers who generate the money, government says it doesn't have it. This time we shall not accept that."

On Thursday, amid the threat to walkout by nurses and midwives, student nurses enrolled at Masaka School of Comprehensive Nursing conducted a boycott to protest exorbitant registration fees and poor quality meals provided by the school.

Occupying the student compound at the school, the students declared their refusal to eat meals, stating that they would not eat weevil-infested beans and other low-quality food that the school provides and for which students are made to pay high prices.

For patients at public-run hospitals and clinics throughout the country, most can wait for days before seeing a doctor, languishing in overcrowded emergency rooms.

Due to the lack of funding made available to the public-run hospital system, many facilities have been

left to deteriorate for decades. There is a generalized lack of modernized equipment and frequent shortages of supplies, even stocks of drugs, which has forced patients to purchase medicines from pharmacies elsewhere.

The Ugandan masses subsist on \$3 a day or less, with an estimated 10 million out of Uganda's total population of 40 million living below the poverty line. Amid this colossal scale of social misery experienced by the masses, there are just 24 individuals at the top of Ugandan society who collectively have a net worth of more than \$4.2 billion.



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