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•Akilu

## MY WIFE DIED BECAUSE THERE WAS NOBODY TO REPLACE HER OXYGEN CYLINDER –Husband of victim of LASUTH workers' strike

Gbenro Adeoye

**L**ife had been good to Kassim Akilu on the home front until the morning of Tuesday, March 25, 2014, two days into the workers' strike at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, Lagos. On that day, Akilu's "happy family" lost a member.

His second wife, Rukayat Akilu, 40, who was on admission at the hospital's emergency ward, died when the oxygen machine supporting her stopped functioning. She was diabetic and hypertensive.

Due to the ongoing strike, there were no health workers in the ward to check the problem with the machine and stabilise Rukayat.

The incident occurred around 3am, about two hours before our correspondent met Akilu.

Fresh from the shock of his wife's death, Akilu tried to confront the loss with bravery. Being a Muslim, Akilu said he had accepted Rukayat's death as required by his faith.

However, Akilu's courage let him down a couple of times during his conversation with our correspondent. On those occasions, Akilu burst into tears and reminisced about his time with his late wife.

He said amid tears, "She was stable on Monday and even told me that she wanted to pray and I told her to pray in her mind. But this morning, the machine used in giving her oxygen stopped working and there was no health worker available to attend to her."

"It could be that there was no more oxygen in the cylinder and it only needed to be replaced."

Akilu said, Rukayat would be "greatly missed."

"She was a very good woman and a good wife. I will miss everything about her. Anytime we were asleep, she would be the one to wake me up for *Salat* (prayers). She never played with my food and she was very neat," he said.

"When we were coming to the hospital for treatment, I never imagined that she would die. I didn't think it could happen. They said it's a teaching hospital and that every equipment was here."

The ongoing strike was embarked on by the hospital's workers under the aegis of LASUTH Workers' Forum, which excluded the medical doctors. The affected workers include nurses, administrative staff, engineers and technicians.

The striking workers are pressing for the immediate implementation of the Consolidated Health Salary Structure among other demands.

Akilu said two doctors who had been attending to Rukayat since the strike commenced, were overwhelmed by the workload left by the other workers, particularly the nurses.

He said, "There were two doctors attending to patients here, but they only came every two hours. They said they had to attend to many patients because of the strike."

"One of the doctors came before my wife died but he later left. When he was leaving, he told me to call on the other doctor in one of the offices if I needed anything. But when the machine stopped working, the other doctor was not around. I knocked and tried to open the door, but no one answered."

Rukayat was Akilu's second wife. The two of them got married five years ago but had no child together.

Meanwhile, Akilu had three children from his first wife. He suspected that Rukayat's failure to bear him a child contributed to her illness.

He said, "We didn't know about the diabetes but I knew she was constantly worried that she had not given birth. When she was urinating too many times and taking a lot of water, we decided to take her to the hospital."

"We had previously taken her to three private hospitals before she was referred here (LASUTH). I brought her to this hospital 10 days ago. But yesterday, some of the workers including the nurses went on strike. Since the strike began, only the doctors have been attending to patients. But they are few and there is a limit to what they can do."

Akilu said the nurses were stationed in the wards and so were at the patients' beck and call, unlike when patients in the wards had to wait for two hours to see a doctor.

Speaking to our correspondent while sobbing, Akilu expressed regret that he did not move Rukayat to another hospital before her death. He said he had thought of it and then decided against it because he was not sure if any other hospital would accept her.

He said, "When the strike started yesterday, I thought of moving her to another hospital but I remembered that we were referred here by other hospitals."

"It is so sad because a teaching hospital is expected to have everything. I was born in Ghana and still go there. This sort of thing cannot happen there because they have nurse assistants

who take charge should there be a strike.

"But it's a shame that we don't have value for human life in Nigeria. I know God gives and takes but maybe she wouldn't have died if there were people to attend to her."

Meanwhile, Akilu said plans would commence in earnest to bury Rukayat, according to Islamic rites.

A woman, who identified herself as Tawa, also expressed fears that her brother's condition might have worsened. She said her brother was lying critically ill in the hospital's emergency ward without any attention from the health workers.

Tawa said, "He's supposed to be receiving drips. But since the drips stopped yesterday morning, there has been no nurse available to replace it. I have to move him to another hospital today."

*Saturday PUNCH* observed that the hospital's clinics and other offices where records are kept, were locked up.

A doctor who did not want to be named, said the striking workers were responsible for locking up some of the offices. He added that doctors had been denied access to patients' files and records.

"The workers even drove some patients away yesterday. The patients we are attending to are the ones that were already on admission or that came back with their test results. We can't register new patients because we don't have access to most things," the doctor said.

In a phone conversation with the Chairman of the Forum, Rashid Bamihe, he vowed that the strike would continue until the state government honoured their demands.

He denied allegations that members of the Forum had been driving patients away from the hospital, adding that the forum was not responsible for Rukayat's death. He blamed the state government for her death.

He said, "When the government meets our demands, we will call off the strike. We will hold a congress later in the week to review and further strategise. These are not fresh issues; we've been on these issues since 2011. If there are sufferings and deaths, it is the government that is at fault. The state government should be held responsible."

"The strike notice we gave to the government expired on March 10, 2014 and we still waited till March 24, 2014 before commencing the strike. This proves that we gave the government enough time. They are all issues that can be resolved within 24 hours."

Bamihe also said that the body had already met with officials of the state government and the hospital board over the strike.

The hospital's Chief Medical Director, Prof. David Oke, could not be reached as he was said to be on leave and his mobile line was not reachable.

Efforts to also reach the State Commissioner for Health, Dr. Jide Idris, on his mobile phone were not successful as he did not answer his calls or respond to a text message sent to him.

However, a man who only identified himself as "a doctor in LASUTH", later called our correspondent to say that Idris gave him the phone number and asked him to make the call.

He denied that the strike was responsible for Rukayat's death, saying "the patient in question was very ill."

He said, "The doctors were the ones trying to keep the woman alive because she was a very ill patient. The doctors have been on duty to attend to patients. Maybe the doctor the husband (Akilu) said he couldn't find went to see other patients at the time. Although, the situation doesn't give any excuse to the government not to look into the crisis. So government is doing a lot. Patients are being managed as much as we can, mainly by the doctors."