

One dies, others groan as JOHESU's strike bites

• FG, labour tango on backlog, as action continues till Saturday

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THE ongoing strike by the National Association of Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), may linger till Saturday when negotiators from the Federal Government and labour representatives would reconvene for another meeting.

The federal government has, however, told JOHESU not to expect payment of backlogs as being demanded by the striking health workers.

JOHESU, comprising all health workers in the country, excluding medical doctors, commenced an indefinite strike last Wednesday.

Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) President, Ayuba Wabba, who led the JOHESU team to the Tuesday meeting with the federal government said the two parties agreed to return to the negotiating table on Saturday morning, after the two sides would have briefed their constituencies on the outcome of the meeting.

But, Labour Minister, Senator Chris Ngige, in a statement signed by his Deputy Director of Press, Samuel Olowookere, stated that, "We all know the economy is not in good shape. If there were promises made when oil was selling at \$150 per barrel and those promises were not kept, it will not be very reasonable to expect a government that came in while oil is selling at \$40 or \$50 to pay backlogs. But, that is what we are suffering here. So, I made it clear to the Resident Doctors, university teachers and am making it clear here. We all have to make sacrifices to make Nigeria great."

The statement where the

minister explained his inability to meet with the JOHESU members last Friday noted that, the minister was fully aware of the sanctity of his responsibilities as a servant and argued it was wrong for a servant to be maligned or brutalized for no just cause.

Meanwhile, patients in some public hospitals in Ebonyi State have pleaded with the federal government to settle its industrial dispute with members of JOHESU, to enable the health workers return to their duty posts and attend to them.

Already, one patient has reportedly died at the Federal Teaching Hospital, in Abakaliki, as a result of the strike.

Speaking with Daily Sun, some of patients in Abakaliki hospital lamented that their condition seemed to have worsened since the health workers downed tools.

One of the patients, Mrs Chioma Nike, an attack victim, lamented that when she visited the Federal Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki, there was no medical officer to attend to them.

Chioma and her husband, Boniface, were attacked by their 30-year-old saleswoman, Ngozi Nwancho, at No 16 Brackembury Street, Abakaliki. When the couples were rushed to the federal hospital, it was under lock. Her husband later died after he was taken to six other hospitals in the area.

Meanwhile, activities at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC), Asaba, Delta State, have been grounded as a result of the on-going strike by health workers.

Patients were turned back from the gate at the hospital by executives of the affiliate bodies who stormed the hospital to enforce the strike directed by the national leadership of JOHESU.

Some patients, who were obviously at the receiving end,

decried the incessant industrial actions at the institution, even as they accused doctors of orchestrating the crises to boost their private clinics.

One Mrs. Ochude, who claimed to have come from far away Ogoja in Aniocha North Local Government Area of the state, explained that she requested the discharge of her child from a hospital in Issele-Uku when the situation became worse, only to come to FMC and was disappointed as a result of the strike.

Regardless, Medical and Dental Consultants' Association of Nigeria (MDCAN) has raised the alarm over alleged harassment and intimidation of her members in some tertiary hospitals by JOHESU members who are currently on strike.

The doctors issued a stern warning to JOHESU members to mind their business and allow them perform their duties rather than meddling into their professional practice.

Chairman of the Committee of Chief Medical Directors/Medical Directors of Federal Tertiary Hospitals in Nigeria, Professor Thomas Agan, described JOHESU and the National Union of Allied Health Professionals (NUAHP)'s demands as not feasible.

JOHESU and NUAHP have, among others, demanded for the immediate restructuring of the administration of teaching hospitals, residency training and revamping infrastructure

In a statement made available to newsmen in Calabar yesterday and signed by the Secretary-General of MDCAN, Dr Affiong Ibanga, the doctors condemned, in strong terms, the physical harassment and barricading of hospital gates to prevent free movement of doctors and patients by members of JOHESU.

"The attention of the Na-

tional Secretariat of MDCAN has been drawn to incidents of harassment and intimidation of medical doctors, patients and other members of the health team by some JOHESU members who are currently on strike.

"While it is generally accepted that a union can declare an industrial dispute with her employer and even embark on strike, MDCAN believes that such action should be carried out within the bounds of the law and respect for others in the workplace.

"MDCAN categorically states that further physical harassment of her members carrying out their legitimate duties, within the hospital premises, will not be tolerated.

Meanwhile, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH), Nnewi chapter of JOHESU has denied the allegation by the leadership of MDCAN that members have been harassing and intimidating medical doctors, patients and other members of the health team in various hospitals across the country.

In a swift reaction, Nigeria Union of Allied Health Workers (NAUTH), Nnewi chapter, absolved itself of any involvement in harassing medical doctors or the patients as claimed by MDCAN.

Chairman of NAUTH chapter of the union, Mr Charles Nwoye, said the only incident was the day the strike started last week Thursday, when some medical personnel, who did not belong to the JOHESU, were seen at the office block of members of JOHESU and were asked to leave the office by the striking workers who did not feel safe to see a non union member around their workplace. He said that should not be seen as harassment since there was no physical attack.