

Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe: Doctors protest condition of health system

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BULAWAYO, 7 November (IRIN) - Doctors in Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo, have gone on strike to protest against deteriorating health services characterised by widespread shortages of drugs, food and equipment.

The stayaway, which started on Monday, is expected to spread to other parts of the country during the course of the week.

"It has become very difficult to work with basically nothing to use in all departments; it is disappointing to watch patients deteriorating in a hospital, as no help can be given to them," medical practitioners at the city's two main referral centres, Mpilo Central Hospital and United Bulawayo Hospitals, said in a statement.

"Doctors took an oath to save lives, and do not want to continue lying to patients that they can do something for them when they know very well there is nothing they can do, as the hospitals can no longer function."

The striking doctors said there was virtually nothing to administer to patients at the two hospitals, and the situation was the same in government-owned health institutions across the country.

Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights, an NGO, indicated in a recent statement that the country's health facilities had "in fact become death traps, as patients continue to die unnecessarily due to drug shortages." In some instances hospitals had no running water.

Officials have acknowledged shortages of key drugs in the recent past.

The health delivery system has virtually collapsed in the last seven years due to lack of foreign exchange to purchase medical requirements and a shortage of qualified personnel, who have fled low pay and poor working conditions for greener pastures in other countries.

Zimbabwe is going through a severe economic crisis, with serious fuel and food shortages brought on by recurring droughts and the government's fast-track land redistribution programme, which have disrupted agricultural production and slashed export earnings.

Doctors in the Bulawayo hospitals were also concerned about the quality and quantity of food being given to patients, and claimed that malnutrition was rampant in government health institutions. At least five patients at the Ingutsheni Hospital for the mentally challenged in Bulawayo died last month after allegedly being diagnosed with malnutrition.

The Zimbabwean deputy health minister, Edwin Muguti, confirmed the five deaths at the hospital, but said the authorities had yet to establish the cause.

"There is basically no food to feed the sick, yet it is only natural that patients need to eat for their conditions to improve. This is worrying us so much, and we demand that government sets its priorities right and starts working towards rebuilding the health sector," the doctors said.

There was no comment from the Zimbabwe Doctors Association, which officially represents the country's medical practitioners.

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