

Hunger strike for SA students in Cuba

About 190 South African medical students in Cuba are on a hunger strike, demanding a bigger monthly stipend.

They say if they do not get what they want, they will return home rather than complete their studies.

"They are demanding US\$700 a month as opposed to the US\$200 they receive," said Department of Health spokesman Jc Maila.

He said the 187 students were in their fifth year, the final year of Cuban medical school.

Maila said the disgruntled students had stormed the South African embassy in Cuba on Tuesday (19 February), but denied reports they had been arrested by local authorities.

Maila was annoyed by the complaint that students allegedly did not like the food they were receiving. He said the lecturers ate the same food.

"I have been there [Cuba] and eaten the food and it consists of rice and a few vegetables and chicken or pork. They also eat eggs," he said.

The students, Maila said, wanted more money to buy food rather than eat what was on offer.

"They also want more money to buy goodies and then party. They are spoilt. Whenever they come home for a holiday, they won't even sit in a bus to Limpopo. We have to provide them with a car," he said.

About 100 students sponsored by the Limpopo department of health were stranded in July when the department failed to pay for their air tickets because the department had run out of money.

This left the graduates without food and shelter for a week until the national department stepped in.

The Health Department spends almost R500,000 per student over six years for a language course, medical training and living expenses.

After two years, the students are flown home for a holiday once a year. The medical course is taught in Spanish.

The department sent 1,000 students to Cuba in September to study medicine.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said this was one of the ways to deal with a shortage of doctors in the country. About 1,200 doctors graduate each year from South African medical schools, which is not enough to fill vacant posts.

Source: *The Times* via I-Net Bridge