

Cote d'Ivoire: 'Danger' as health workers strike

Ailing Ivorians lined up for hours at public hospitals in the commercial capital Abidjan waiting for doctors on 18 February, the first day of a three-day strike by state medical workers.

ABIDJAN, 18 February 2009 (IRIN) - "We have been at the [main public hospital] in Cocody [a section of Abidjan] for four hours," market vendor Aline Kouadio told IRIN. "My eight-year-old son is haemorrhaging and the doctors are not here." She said she first tried to find a doctor at the hospital in her own neighbourhood Yopougon 6km away.

"There were so many people in the emergency room I could not wait any longer. We are waiting to see whether the doctor on duty for emergencies here will see us, all the time praying we can avoid the worst."

After talks between the medical workers' union and the government broke down this week, union leaders called a strike for 18, 19 and 20 February, Atté Boka, medical doctor and head of the health workers union told IRIN.

Unlike past strikes medical workers are maintaining minimum services - emergency care, similar to that normally provided on weekends and holidays, said the union leader.

The strike has not been observed equally nationwide; on 18 February health workers in some districts told IRIN health centres were functioning normally, while in others only emergency care was available.

Atté told IRIN on the eve of the strike that it applied to state doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists, veterinarians, lab technicians and orderlies.

"This unfortunate strike is purely the government's fault," said Atté. "We do not like going on strike. We know that people are in hard times, given the situation of the country. But we have been forced to do so."

Members of the health union, SYNACASS-CI, said the government has failed to implement past agreements over improved salaries and working conditions.

Doctors currently earn on average US\$330 per month and nurses \$240, according to the union. Atté said the government should have applied a previously-negotiated salary increase this year, bumping up a doctor's salary to more than \$1,000.

Health Minister Allah Kouadio Remi, speaking on national television on 17 February, denounced the strike "illegal".

Minister of Public Service Hubert Oulaye told journalists on 16 February: "I do not understand why [the union] wants to go on strike. They must not think only of themselves. Côte d'Ivoire is facing enormous difficulties. People must show a conscience and responsibility."

Oulaye said the plan had been for the government to raise medical workers' salaries in January, "but given the financial difficulties [we face], we put this off to 2010."

“If doctors go on strike, people are going to die,” said the minister.

Front-page headlines in the local press on 18 February included: “Mortal danger in hospitals”, “Hospitals paralysed today” and “To the infirm: Death at your door.”

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