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STATUS OF DOCTORS' STRIKE AND THE HUMAN RIGHT TO LIVE

Medical doctors servicing public health facilities in Dar es salaam, Dodoma, Mwanza, Kilimanjaro and Tanga embarked on a strike on 24 January 2012 that threatened to paralyse the health sector in the country. The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that the three-week strike threatened the health and right to live for most Tanzanians.

We are puzzled to see our government failing to efficiently handle this problem. We feel that this situation can be solved amicably between the government and the doctors for the sake of saving lives.

It is obvious that health issues are not given priority in Tanzania although they are basic human rights. For example, our doctor-patient ratio is 1:28,571 against the recommended UN standard of 1:10,000. This has posed a lot of questions about the level of health service provision in Tanzania. The services are also being affected by a 51% human resources shortage, the inavailability of medicines and medical supplies. One of the reasons for the deficiency in human resources brain drain due to lack of incentives. As a result, most of the doctors are seeking better opportunities in other countries. This shows that the government is not investing enough in improving doctors' welfare, forcing them to down tools.

On January 29, 2012, the government through the Prime Minister, Mizengo Pinda instructed all doctors to go back to work. He also pointed out that the government would bring in doctors from the army to fill the gap. This decision by the government raised a number of questions:

1. If there are enough doctors in military hospitals, why should they not provide services to citizens and fill the 50% current shortage of doctors?
2. Since military doctors are supposed to provide services in military hospitals, what will happen in their absence?
3. Are there differences in salaries between civilian and military doctors and what could be the impact of shifting military doctors to public hospitals?
4. In the absence of specialists and since military hospitals refer patients to public referral hospitals, why do they now go and provide those referral services in the referral hospitals?



In his speech, the honorable Prime Minister attacked the leader of the doctors' committee spearheading the strike instead of listening to their grievances. It could be better if the government would address the very pertinent issues which are key in saving wananchi's lives.

Furthermore, the honorable Prime Minister's directive, that all striking doctors should go back to work or risk losing their jobs is counterproductive as it does not guarantee the quality of service delivered. For example, the doctors could heed the directive but stage a sit in.

The PM also stated that the doctors' demands were very high and the government could not afford. We feel that this problem could be solved amicably. It is imperative that the government should prioritise the health sector since it is a healthy and productive employee who contributes towards the fiscal burden through taxpaying. We feel if the government controls corruption and public funds misuse, resources can be better channeled to needy or critical areas. As an example, the CAG report of 2010 indicated that the parliament authorised 48 billion shillings for economic development but it is worrying to note that 1.8 bn was paid to ghost workers. Surprisingly, the government was ready to pay Dowans (a ghost company) Tsh 94 bn without the necessary budgetary approval, yet the government is not prepared to listen to genuine demands by doctors.

As Tanzanians, tax payers and watchdogs, we recommend that the government through the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare:

- Holds a meeting with doctors to forge a way forward.
- Stops handling this issue politically, because it involves the health and welfare of citizens.
- Military doctors be posted to public hospitals to reduce human resource gap instead of being used as means to end doctors' strike.
- In conclusion, it is the duty of every citizen to pressurize the government to solve this problem in any means possible. This is not the duty of activists alone.

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