

Strike wave rocks Zambia

Our correspondent

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A strike by civil servants and public sector workers in Zambia continues to escalate. According to press reports, about 90 percent of the 90,000 civil servants have been on strike since May 28, demanding a 100 percent pay increase. Five public sector unions have rejected the government's 35 percent offer, as it fails to keep pace with inflation, running at over 25 percent for the last six years.

Leonard Hikaumba, leader of the Civil Servants Union of Zambia, said on June 7 that the strike will continue, adding that his union would disrupt the summit meeting of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)—due to be held in Lusaka in July, if their demands were not met. He has said that all civil servants in the country would be more than willing to disrupt the OAU summit in order to embarrass the Zambian government. "If the African heads of state want to protect their integrity they better be wise and take this as a timely warning. We will ensure that the whole summit doesn't take place", he said. Hikaumba added that the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) was behaving like thugs who had no direction and were afraid of their own shadows.

Zambia's largest health facility, the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Lusaka has virtually stopped operations, with 10 wards closed and patients being transferred to other hospitals. Striking staff said that management had written threatening letters to nurses on probation, demanding they return to work or face dismissal. The nurses said that the death rate at the hospital had doubled, forcing people to carry their sick relatives' home and many patients to leave the hospital. The banks had also refused to pay nurses their May wages in an attempt to force them back to work. Other hospitals in Zambia are reportedly affected and are said to be facing increased death rates.

Zambian Vice President Enoch Kavindele refused to address the hospital workers at UTH, saying "I have

done it before with Kitwe General Hospital workers but I was greeted with discourtesies and disrespect. I was showered with anti-government songs". Kavindele maintained the government position that there was no money to pay the public sector workers, saying that he hoped the current negotiations with the union leaders would produce "positive mutual understanding."

Other reports state that most schools remain closed because of a teachers' strike, and Lusaka's city council workers, including grave diggers, refuse collectors and fire-fighters, are continuing their strike action, saying they had not been paid salaries for three months. Lusaka's airport is only being kept open by Zambian Air Force personnel, as meteorologists have also joined the civil servants' strike.

The strike is only the latest manifestation of growing hostility to the MMD regime of President Frederick Chiluba. More than any other government in Africa, Zambia has rigorously applied IMF structural adjustment programmes and slashed its state budget. Last year the major part of its economy, copper mining, was privatised with the loss of thousands of jobs. Information has been leaked to an official investigation into corruption, showing that three quarters of a million dollars of public money ended up in the hands of government ministers. A whole section of the MMD leaders were expelled for opposing Chiluba's demand to remain in office for a further term. Opposition politicians are regularly arrested and beaten up.

The response of the government is a further security clampdown. Zambian police said on Thursday June 7 that they had banned political rallies on several days this month and next month. Police spokesman Lemmy Kajoba said rallies were banned between June 15-26 and between July 2-10. Kajoba claimed this was necessary because there would not be enough police officers to monitor rallies, at a time when the solar eclipse is expected on June 21, and the OAU is holding

its summit in July. The opposition parties have rejected the ban as illegal, and say they will ignore it.



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