

PRESS STATEMENT BY MEC FOR HEALTH, KZN, DR SIBONGISENI DHLOMO

26 JUNE 2009

Ladies and gentlemen

This is indeed an extraordinary media briefing dictated upon by extraordinary activities by health professionals in a democratic SA, exactly 2 months after peaceful elections that have once more given the ruling party, African National Congress a decisive win to govern the country.

This statement is backed fully by the KZN Cabinet and has also been discussed with Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi.

The strike that started on Monday, 22 June 2009 is unprotected- and everyone knows that. The government has not made strong pronouncement on that matter for various reasons.

We have had a situation since Monday 22 June where doctors, dentists and some pharmacists have been out on the streets despite the public information that talks between government and SAMA would resume on Wednesday, 24 June 2009.

EVENTS:

22 JUNE 2009

While visiting the hospitals on the very first day of the strike, I noticed that yes, indeed more than 90% of our doctors, dentists and some pharmacists were not at their areas of work.

I got a chance to address more than 600 doctors at Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine, where my welcome was less than cordial.

SANDF started supporting us with doctors and other health care professionals, and we greatly appreciate that.

23 JUNE 2009.

The Premier and myself visited Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine to speak to Dean of Faculty, Prof Sturm and all Heads of Departments.

The objective of that visit was to share with the heads of departments the government's concern on the unprotected strike and the possible consequences of the loss of lives by our people as a result of the strike.

In that meeting it became apparent that heads of departments were not only unable to persuade the registrars and all health professionals to return to work but they themselves appeared to be sympathetic to this unprotected strike.

24 JUNE 2009

There was a cabinet briefing on this matter and cabinet issued a press statement to request doctors to return to work and allow process of negotiation that had resumed that morning to continue.

Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi did something unprecedented, to make public the government's offer even before it was tabled before the Bargaining Council.

The offer has been welcomed by some doctors and their leadership while the final outcomes are awaited

25 JUNE 2009

Certain groups of doctors have continued to undermine the process of negotiations and claim to have consulted widely about this package and that it is insufficient.

The Premier instructed me to once more speak to the Dean, Prof Sturm and the heads of departments of which I did. The outcome of that meeting did not yield any positive results.

SAMA leadership in KZN was also met and good progress was made to collectively understand the status of the Bargaining Council process

It is the view of this government that we have complied with Labour Relations Act which among other things guides us that:

Participation in a strike that does not comply with the Act is a form of misconduct.

We think we have been more than reasonable, while dealing with an unprotected strike. We have met with various relevant stakeholders including union representatives in trying to resolve the situation and consulted widely with all quarters.

We have continuously reminded them that the consequences of this unprotected strike have for reaching negative outcomes to the health of people in the province. Lives have been lost; our people have been turned away from hospitals because of the absence of doctors.

Some of the striking doctors have gone to Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Western Cape to ask doctors there to join this unprotected strike. There has been threats and intimidation to those who have been working and want to go back to work. We have exhausted all possible means that are reasonable and fair in dealing very sensitively with the strike. We are aware that society has been quite sympathetic to the concerns of the medical profession. Our government has apologized profusely on the way doctors' salaries have not been revised over years.

We have demonstrated that by doing quite a lot of unprecedented activities around negotiations and unprotected strike. Notwithstanding all that, doctors have continued to defy all logic and continue to be on an unprotected strike.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

At 4h00 this morning we have given all doctors, dentists and pharmacists an ultimatum to resume duties not later than 08h00, June, 26, 2009. We, as Department of Health, are designated as an essential service provider and therefore find the action of these health professionals disrupting service delivery and compromising patients lives.

We are aware that HPCSA is also concerned about this matter and a possible charge of professional misconduct and putting a profession into dispute can be laid. Such a statement remains in the doctors' record for life.

We are preparing a court interdict for those who remain out of work. This situation is untenable, we cannot continue to put the lives of our people in danger and the government will act. It is becoming clearer that this strike action is deeper than the eye can see.

Issued by KZN Department of HEALTH