



11th November, 2025

The Resident Doctors' Strike is a Call to End Nigeria's Public Health Disaster

For years, the Nigerian governments have failed to adequately fund public health. The cost of this failure is very real for most people -- we all know people who have lost their lives due to poor health and treatment. The statistics also show this failure. 2021 is the year for which we have the most reliable statistics. And in 2021, at least 750,000 Nigerians died due to preventable diseases like respiratory infections, malaria, diarrhoea, and child deaths. This situation is most shameful since most of these deaths were preventable. If these Nigerians lived in countries that funded public health, there is a high chance they would still be alive today. Their blood is on the hands of the ruling class, who continue to show their inability to meet the dreams and hopes of all of us.

In response to the failure of our public health system, resident doctors have gone on strike. Who are the resident doctors? These are doctors who have passed their final university exams and are members of the Nigerian Association of Resident Doctors (NARD). All that is left is for them to gain experience on the job. Four in 10 Nigerian doctors are residents, and nine in 10 doctors in our teaching hospitals are residents. In fact, if you have received treatment from a doctor recently, that doctor was likely a resident.

NARD has gone on strike to demand that the government address unpaid salaries and poor working conditions. Resident doctors often work over 100 hours a week. On weekends, some work 24 to 48 hours straight with very little sleep in between. And the situation is getting worse. Because of these conditions, doctors are fleeing Nigeria. The outcome is that those left behind are even more overworked, while being owed salaries. The situation is so dire that about 1 in 10 residents have admitted to attempting suicide; many more have but will not admit it due to shame. This situation cannot continue.

Including resident doctors, there are only 55,000 doctors in Nigeria today. There are Nigerian states with fewer than one doctor per 20,000 people. The international standard is one doctor per 600 people, and only Lagos and the FCT come close. Between 2019 and 2024, about 16,000 doctors fled Nigeria to practice overseas. In 2024, we graduated 4,000 doctors from medical school; the same number fled Nigeria. Given the pay and working conditions of Nigerian doctors, who can blame them?

In 2001, African governments met in Abuja and pledged to spend at least 15% of their budgets on public health. Tinubu's government is spending only 5% -- only a third of the



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pledge -- and less than many other African countries. As we have already stated, we can measure the cost of this failure in peoples' lives.

The government must fulfil its debt to our resident doctors. It must pay all unpaid salaries. It must -- as a matter of national urgency -- fund medical education so we can train more doctors. The question is not financial; it is one of misplaced priorities. Cuba has far fewer resources than Nigeria, yet it has close to one doctor for every 100 people. As a matter of national urgency, it must fund public health in all our communities, so that we can live healthy lives and every Nigerian can receive free treatment when sick. We should not have to die from diseases with cures that are over 100 years old.

For these reasons, the current national strike by NARD and the pending strike by health workers in JOHESU from next Friday are critical. A government with its priorities in order would address these issues proactively. But this government has shown time and time again that it must be dragged like a donkey to see sense. The labour movement must provide these strikes with the support and solidarity necessary for the doctors and other health sector workers to win. Their victory would be a victory for all of us and will make a real difference. It will be a first step in reducing the massive level of unnecessary deaths that we currently suffer.

In solidarity!

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