

Uganda on defensive over medical 'brain drain' uproar

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Uganda's government on Tuesday hit back at mounting criticism of plans to 'export' over 200 health workers to the Caribbean, insisting it was only seeking to regulate an existing labour market and prevent abuses.

A plan to send at least 241 [health professionals](#) from the east African country, itself plagued by a major shortage of doctors and nurses, to Trinidad and Tobago has been met with fierce criticism.

The Institute of Public Policy and Research (IPPR), a Ugandan think-tank, is challenging the exodus and seeking a [court injunction](#) to block what it has blasted as a "state-facilitated medical brain drain" that violates the right to healthcare.

A ruling on the challenge, described by activists as a key test case that could have repercussions in other developing nations, has yet to be made.

Uganda's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, insisted it was not "heartless".

"Ugandan workers have gone abroad in an unregulated manner and this has led sometimes to elements of human trafficking," permanent secretary at the ministry, James Mugume, told AFP.

"Some people tell them they have a job as a nurse, but when they reach their destination they find that actually there was no such position. So that's why the foreign ministry said 'let's ensure that we regulate'," he

added.

The overall objective, he said, was to prevent Ugandan professionals from ending up "on some rough boat in the Mediterranean".

Officials also repeated that the scheme was merely part of its bilateral cooperation with Trinidad and Tobago, from which Uganda has also benefitted—with aid such as oil and gas industry training and financial support for its police.

The scheme has been criticised by the United States, which gives \$400 million (357 million euros) in aid to Uganda's health sector every year.

Ugandan activists insist their country can ill afford to lose skilled staff and argue that more people will die needlessly if the plan goes ahead. They point out that Trinidad and Tobago already has a doctor to patient ratio that is 12 times better than Uganda's.

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