

Bishops 'horrified' at intimidation tactics in South African strike

CAPE TOWN, South Africa - The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference said it was horrified at the intimidation of doctors and teachers by striking protesters and at the neglect of patients and pupils during an intensifying public sector strike.

"We are horrified that care is being denied to the weakest and most vulnerable," the bishops said in an Aug. 20 statement signed by Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban.

The bishops urged those working in health and education to "give serious consideration to the poor, the vulnerable, the sick and the young people who are desperately striving for a better life by completing" their schooling.

"We call on all educators and health care workers, especially those who are Catholics, to examine their own conscience and action seriously," the bishops said, noting that, while they support workers' right to strike, "we call on you to recognize the rights of others to choose freely" whether or not to take part in the action that began Aug. 10 and intensified Aug. 19.

Rubber bullets and water cannon were used against public sector workers protesting outside several hospitals in Johannesburg, with both sides blaming each other for the violence that led to the hospitalization of at least seven strikers.

State hospitals were left understaffed until military doctors, nurses and soldiers were called in at the request of the health minister.

The national Education Department said Aug. 19 that it had received reports of incidents of assault, damage to property and intimidation at schools.

South Africa's largest union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, which has 1.3 million members, called the indefinite strike to try to force the government to meet its demands for an 8.6 percent pay increase and a bigger housing allowance. The state has so far refused to budge on its offer of a 7 percent wage increase and 700 rands (\$95) a month housing allowance.

The bishops also urged South Africa's Public Service Commission and Education Department to ensure that remuneration negotiations are scheduled for the beginning of the year so that teachers' strikes can be avoided during preparations for final exams.