

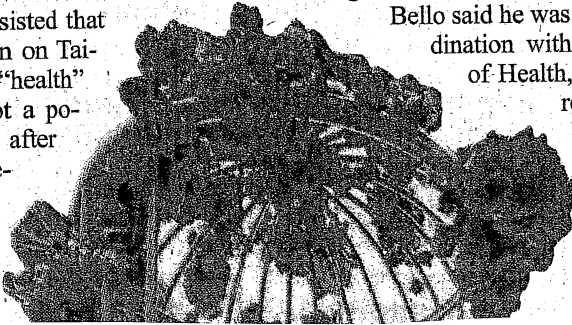


Palace: Travel ban may expand to other countries

By MJ Blancaflor

PRESIDENTIAL Spokesman Salvador Panelo said Thursday the Philippines was also open to impose a travel ban to other countries with confirmed cases of COVID-19.

He also insisted that the travel ban on Taiwan was a "health" issue and not a political one after authorities received reports that Taipei would



implement retaliatory measures against the Philippines.

Meanwhile, Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III on Thursday appealed to lift the travel ban on the Filipino workers in Taiwan, saying the expanded travel ban might have detrimental effects on them.

Bello said he was in constant coordination with the Department of Health, and had already requested the lifting of the ban on departing Filipino workers.

"For those who are affected

by the travel ban in Taiwan, we ask for your patience and in a few days, there will be a review. While waiting for the lifting of the ban, we are providing financial assistance," Bello said.

Taiwan is considering countermeasures if the Philippines does not lift the ban on Taiwanese citizens visiting the country over fears

of the coronavirus, the island's foreign ministry said on Thursday.

The Philippines, more than 115,000 of whose nationals work in Taiwan in factories and as domestic helpers, said this week it had included Taiwan as part of a ban on people from China visiting the country.

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But Panelo denied that the inclusion of Taiwan in the travel ban was due to the Philippines' "One-China Policy"—a concept that Taiwan is part of China.

President Rodrigo Duterte ordered the inclusion of Taiwan in the travel ban due to confirmed cases of the COVID-19 disease there, Panelo said.

"Last night, the President said, 'My primary concern is the health and safety of our countrymen. We have to do what is necessary to secure their safety,'" Panelo told reporters in Malacañang.

Panelo, however, on Tuesday said that Taiwan was included in the travel ban because it was a "part of China."

"Since there is a ban on China, necessarily Taiwan, being part of China, is included. And we always follow the recommendations of the World Health Organization," Panelo told reporters last Tuesday.

Aside from Taiwan, the Philippines banned travel to China and its special administrative regions Hong Kong and Macau in a bid to contain the COVID-19 outbreak.

Earlier in the day, President Duterte urged the public to remain calm in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and asked Filipinos to trust the government.

"I call on our people to remain calm, vigilant and responsible and I also ask your trust and cooperation, support as we face the challenge. Let's unite together as one nation. This challenge can be overcome," Duterte said in a taped message aired on state-run RTVM. With Joel E. Zurbano and Macon Ramos-Araoza