



Taiwan travel ban stays amid retaliation threat

resident Duterte rejected on Thursday Taiwan's appeal to lift a ban on its citizens visiting the Philippines, saying his primary concern was the safety of Filipinos.

Taiwan said it was considering countermeasures if the Philippines did not lift the ban imposed on Monday to contain the spread of a new coronavirus that had emerged in China, but Mr. Duterte, according to his spokesperson Salvador Panelo, had decided that the restriction stays "until the danger persists."

"My primary concern is the health and safety of our countrymen," Panelo quoted Mr. Duterte as saying.

On Feb. 2, the government banned all travel to and from China and its two administrative regions—Hong Kong and Macau—as a precautionary measure against the spread of the virus to the Philippines. Duterte on Monday, however, the

Department of Health (DOH) said the ban covered Taiwan, following the Philippines' One China policy, which recognizes China and considers Taiwan a Chinese province.

Panelo, too, said the expansion of the ban to include Taiwan followed the One China policy, although he added that it was also based on recommendations made by the World Health Organization (WHO).

No WHO recommendation

The WHO, however, denied that it had recommended to any government the imposition of travel restrictions on China even though the epidemic was spreading fast.

"WHO's position has always been that there be no travel restriction," Rabindra Abeyesinghe, the WHO representative in the Philippines, told reporters on Wednesday.

On Thursday, Panelo changed his stand, attributing it to Mr.

Duterte, whom he quoted as saying the One China policy had "nothing to do" with the expansion of the ban to cover Taiwan.

For safety

"I asked him (Mr. Duterte). He said, 'Nothing to do with it. It's the safety.' He was very emphatic. 'It transcends orders if the health of our people is at stake,'" Panelo said, quoting the President.

Taiwan is governed entirely separately from China, but Beijing claims the island as its own and the WHO clubs its virus cases in the category for China, which has led some countries to impose the same restrictions on Taiwanese as on Chinese citizens.

Asked about Taiwan's appeal to lift the ban, Panelo said: "The President said last night, 'My primary concern is the health, the safety of our countrymen.' Until the danger persists, then we have to do what

is necessary to secure their safety."

Taiwan countermeasures

Taiwanese foreign ministry spokesperson Joanne Ou told reporters in Taipei that Taiwan had a planned response if the Philippines maintained its ban, but she declined to elaborate, saying a decision was awaited from the Philippine government.

"We will continue to communicate with the Philippines and explain that this is a one-sided and wrong decision by the Philippines' health ministry, which has already affected the relationship between the two countries of Taiwan and the Philippines," Ou said.

Asked about the possibility that Taiwan might withdraw the visa-free privilege it had granted to Filipinos as a countermeasure to the ban, Panelo replied: "Each country has the right to react on any act perceived or taken by them as

against its own interest. What can we do about it? We have our own interest to protect."

Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III is also seeking the lifting of the ban to protect 115,000 Filipinos who work in Taiwan.

In a statement issued on Thursday, Bello said he was coordinating with the DOH, which he had asked to lift the restriction.

Bello sought understanding from Filipino workers, saying "the implementation of a temporary ban by the DOH is for your own safety as well."

He said he was hoping the "ban will be lifted in a few days."

Migrante warning

The Taiwan chapter of the labor group Migrante warned the government on Thursday that it would be responsible for "whatever happens" to Filipino workers affected by the ban.

Gilda Banugan, chair of Migrante Taiwan, said Filipino

workers were stranded in Taiwan and the Philippines cause of the restriction.

Banugan said employers would most likely replace Filipino workers who would not be able to report back for work on time.

"Up to now it is not clear how long the travel ban will last. With that, many [migrants] won't get their compensation from their employers," she said.

There is no local transmission of the coronavirus in the Philippines. The country has three confirmed cases, all of them Chinese nationals from Wuhan, the epicenter of the epidemic in Hubei province. (One died on Feb. 1 and the other had recovered.)

Health authorities are monitoring hundreds of people who had interacted with the Chinese nationals. So far, none has tested positive for the virus. —REPORTS FROM REUTERS, JULIO AURELIO, TINA G. SANTOS AND NESTOR BURGOS JR./INQ