



Palace: Travel ban stays, more areas may be covered

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

MALACAÑANG yesterday said the Philippines is looking at imposing a ban on travelers from other countries with confirmed cases of the 2019 coronavirus disease, now officially called COVID-19, as it maintained the travel ban for Taiwan is part of efforts to ensure the safety and health of Filipinos.

At least 24 countries and territories have so far reported COVID-19 infections.

The Philippine ban covers China and its special administrative regions -- Hong Kong and Macau, aside from Taiwan.

Taiwan has said it was considering countermeasures if the Philippines did not lift the ban. Some 115,000 Filipinos live and work

in Taiwan, mainly in factories and employed as household help.

Taiwan is governed entirely separately from China, but Beijing claims the island as its own and the World Health Organization (WHO) clubs its virus cases in the category for China, which has led some countries to impose the

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same restrictions on Taiwanese as on Chinese citizens.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Joanne Ou yesterday 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 Philippines 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.

Taiwan and the Philippines have close economic and cultural ties, but no formal diplomatic relations, as the Philippines, like most countries, only recognizes the government in Beijing, and not in Taipei.

Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Salvador Panelo, concurrent presidential spokesman, said the ban on the four areas would remain while the health threat exists.

He said concerned agencies are monitoring the coronavirus situation and studying if there is a need to expand the coverage of the travel ban.

On Taiwan, he acknowledged the possibility it would lift the visa-free privilege it has given the Philippines, but said the Filipinos' welfare is the priority.

"Each country has right to react on any acts perceived to be taken against their interests. Tayo may sariling interes na inaalaagan, ang interes ng kalusugan at kaligtasan ng ating mga kababayan (We have our own interests to protect, the health and safety of Filipinos). We understand where their reactions are coming from," he said.

He reiterated the "one-China policy" is not the main reason for the inclusion of Taiwan in the ban.

Prior to yesterday's briefing, Panelo said in several radio and TV interviews that the ban stemmed from an advisory of the World Health Organization (WHO) against traveling to China and its special administrative regions.

DUTERTE: 'TRUST GOV'T'

President Duterte, in a message, urged Filipinos to be calm, vigilant and to trust the government which is doing all it can to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in the country.

In a taped message released by Malacañang, the President said there is no reason to panic or worry as there is still no local transmission of the coronavirus in the country despite having three confirmed cases but all foreigners.

Only two people have died from the virus outside mainland China, one in Hong Kong and one in the Philippines.

Duterte said he understands some people are anxious, concerned and even scared but contingencies are in place and the government continues to coordinate with WHO and private stakeholders.

"I call on our people to remain calm, vigilant, responsible and I also ask for your trust and cooperation,

support as we face the challenge. Tayo ay magkaisa (Let us unite), together as one nation, this challenge can be overcome," he said.

The President also urged the public to be more discerning about the information they receive amid the proliferation of false information about the disease. He said the public should get information from government.

Panelo rejected observations the public address of the President came late, saying the government efforts against the spread of the virus have been there from the start.

The outbreak in China was first reported in December last year. The first death in the Philippines was reported on February 2.

TAIWAN-BOUND OFWs

Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III said he has requested the health department to allow Filipino workers bound for Taiwan to be allowed to leave.

"We are seeking understanding from our OFWs because the implementation of a temporary ban by the DOH is for your own safety as well. We hope for a possible lifting of the ban in a few days," he said.

"While waiting for the lifting of the ban, we are providing P10,000 financial assistance," he said.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said it was the Inter-agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases that decided on the travel ban and not the Department of Health.

The task force is led by the DOH and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Meanwhile, the House on Wednesday night unanimously adopted a resolution honoring the "heroism" of the 10-member government team involved in bringing home 32 Filipinos from China's Wuhan City, COVID-19 epicenter.

The group was composed of physicians and nurses from the DOH and DFA.

"These brave individuals not only answered the call of duty but exhibited a strong sense of compassion for our 'kababayan and nationalism that motivated them to volunteer their services and expertise to undertake this critical mission," said Resolution No. 711 authored by Speaker Alar Peter Cayetano, majority leader Ferdinand Martin Romualdez and minority leader Bienvenido Abante Jr.

The members of the DOH team were physicians Neptali Labasat of the Bureau of Quarantine and Oliver Macalinao of the San Lazaro General Hospital, nurse Rowel Divinagracia of the Philippine Heart Center and Jay Julian of the DOH Health Emergency Management Bureau, and medical technologist Elmer Collong also of the Philippine Heart Center.

The DFA contingent was composed of assistance-to-national officers Rowell Casaclang, Abdul Rahman, and Richard delos Santos; and Mark Anthony Gueger and Sanny Darren Bejarin of the Philippine consulate in Shanghai — *With Gerard Naval, Wendel Vigilia, and Reuters*