



# Taiwan travel ban lifted

By CHRISTINA MENDEZ

The ban on travel to and from Taiwan has been lifted amid protests by Taipei as well as affected Filipino workers over the restriction imposed purportedly as safeguard against the spread of the coronavirus disease or COVID-19.

Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat said the inter-agency task force on COVID-19 (IATF-covid19) recommended the lifting of the ban after a meeting at Malacañang last night.

Malacañang said the lifting of the ban takes effect immediately.

In a statement, presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said the IATF "has resolved to lift the travel restrictions imposed upon Taiwan, effective

immediately."

"Accordingly, travel may now be made by any national to Taiwan from the Philippines and vice versa," he said.

"The lifting of the travel ban on Taiwan is highly assuring and we hope that the nCoV (COVID-19) crisis would soon be resolved, worldwide," Puyat said in a statement.

"Ultimately, the recovery of all affected

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countries is a universal prayer, especially that tourism is an inclusive and sustainable business for and of the people," she added.

Officials said the travel ban on China remains in force due to the huge number of COVID-19 related deaths and infection in their country.

The Philippine government declared a travel ban on China, Hong Kong and Macau last Feb. 2 but belatedly included Taiwan last Monday, supposedly as precautionary measure.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said the task force – in lifting the ban – considered the absence of local transmission of COVID-19 in Taiwan as well as the low volume of travelers coming from that country.

He dismissed insinuations that the decision was due to pressure from Taiwan, specifically its supposed threat to remove the visa-free privileges for Filipino travelers.

"Two things come to fold, number one, the absence of local transmission in Taiwan and number two, relatively the low volume of travelers from Taiwan to Manila," he said at a briefing in Malacañang.

"For us, purely on public health and public safety, and the need to see whether there is a threat, or if we can allow travelers from Taiwan to the Philippines," he said.

Earlier yesterday, he stressed that the decision to include Taiwan in the ban was in the interest of the Filipino people. Immediately after announcing the ban, Taipei expressed outrage and threatened to impose unspecified sanctions on the Philippines.

"And we are aware of the sentiments of the Taiwan government vis-à-vis the travel ban and all of these will be considered in our deliberations, and hopefully come up with the consensus not just to address specifically the issue on Taiwan having been included in the travel ban," Duque said.

He said the task force would also formulate a set criteria or parameters for determining inclusion or exclusions. "So that is what we will wait for, whatever consensus the task force arrives at, we will share with the media as soon as possible," he said.

Reminded of an earlier Palace pronouncement that the government's one-China policy was factored in in the decision to include Taiwan in the ban, Duque said: "The reason and the only reason I should like to believe that has been considered in including Taiwan in the travel ban is really nothing else than public health and safety. That is the only consideration."

## More bans unlikely

He also said the task force is not inclined to recommend to President Duterte any more travel ban for other countries. "None as of the moment. Let's keep it at that," he said.

Reading from the three-page resolution adopted by the inter-agency task force, Communications Secretary Martin Andanan said the IATF "independently" verified protocols and became "convinced that the protocols provide reliable assurance that sufficient measures are in place to effectively prevent potential carriers of the disease from entering or departing Taiwan."

"Whereas, the IATF is continuously monitoring several risk indicators and protocols from other jurisdictions such as Macau, with a view to modifying the current travel restrictions if considerations of public health will warrant," the resolution read.

Aside from Duque and Puyat, the other signatories to the resolution are Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III, Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra, Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Brigido Dulay, Interior Undersecretary Francisco Cruz, Transportation Secretary Arthur Tugade and Department of Information and Communications Technology officer-in-charge Manuel Anthony Tan.

In welcoming the Philippine government's change of heart, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in the Philippines (TECO) said Taiwan "has taken all measures needed to contain the spread" of COVID-19 and that Taipei "will continue to work closely with the international community, including the Philippines" to fight the disease and "safeguard the health and welfare of humanity."

"The Republic of China (Taiwan) attaches great importance to its long-standing relationship with the Republic of the Philippines. We are determined to strengthen our bilateral ties and promote our people-to-people connectivity," TECO said in a statement.

It expressed "deep appreciation to all Filipino friends who have voiced their sincere support for removing Taiwan from the temporary travel ban."

"We especially commend the Manila Economic and Cultural Office for its tireless efforts to help remove Taiwan from the travel ban," the TECO statement read.

Iligan City Rep. Frederick Siao and Minority Leader Bienvenido Abante Jr. said Taiwan should not have been covered by the travel restrictions in the first place.

"Taiwan's health care system is much more advanced than the Philippines'. Their COVID-19 situation is well contained. Our Manila Economic and Cultural Office in Taiwan has taken adequate measures," Siao said in a statement.

"The Department of Health should stay away from foreign policy issues while it deals with the COVID-19. Not including Taiwan in the ban would not violate the one-China policy," the lawmaker stressed.

"The World Health Organization did not issue advisory of banning travels to and from Taiwan.

and Training Institute said the lifting of the travel ban on Taiwan was the "right thing to do."

In an interview, center president Susan Ople stressed it is "important to preserve the (country's) relationship with Taiwan" for the sake of migrant Filipino workers.

"That's good. Our workers will be relieved to know that they can go back to their jobs and that the ties between the Philippines and Taiwan will no longer be strained," she added.

She maintained the country's "good relationship with Taiwan should be preserved because it is one of the best labor markets and one of the most dependable trade partners that we have."

She added Taiwan has "a very fair and responsive labor grievance machinery" that allows a worker with grievances to seek help directly from its labor center.

"It is also one of the highest paying, even for factory workers," she added.

Ople also pointed out that any travel restriction should be based on health considerations and not politics.

"This has to be seen purely in health perspective. It (travel ban) will be acceptable if it involves universal health concerns. But once you play politics, our workers will be affected," she said.

Federation of Free Workers (FFW) president Sonny Matula said using the one-China policy as justification for the travel ban is "unacceptable."

"It's very welcome," he said of the lifting of the ban. "We don't think it is necessary at this point. For one, Taiwan is far from the fire so to speak," he told **The STAR**.

Meanwhile, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. yesterday turned down suggestions to impose a travel ban to and from Singapore amid the rising cases of COVID-19 infection in the island state.

"I will not support a travel ban to & from ASEAN Singapore. A ban should hinge NOT on the incidence & # of infections/fatalities but on the demonstrated capability of the state concerned to contain the disease & strictly regulate ingress and egress from its air/sea ports," Locsin said on Twitter.

Singapore has the biggest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases outside China, at 58 as of yesterday.

Countries such as South Korea, Israel, Kuwait and Qatar have already advised their citizens to avoid travel to Singapore.

Changi Airport in Singapore is one of the busiest hubs in the world.

The Bureau of Immigration (BI) said it has not yet imposed an entry restriction on travelers from Singapore.

Immigration spokesperson Dana Sandoval said the BI will impose a travel ban on Singapore only if the DOH recommends it.

"Changes in policy is subject to the recommendations of the