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Page/s: A1 & A2

PH lifts travel ban on Taiwan

Macau may be next for clearance, but ban on Singapore under study

By MJ Blancaflor and Macon Ramos-Araneta

THE Philippines on Friday lifted the travel ban on Taiwan effective immediately after it threatened to retaliate by revoking the visa-free entry privilege of Filipinos.

Departmental Spokesman Salvador Panelo made the announcement after the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases said the travel ban was lifted due to the strict measures implemented by

Taipei government to contain the spread of COVID-19. "Travel may now be made by any national to Taiwan from the Philippines, and vice versa," Panelo said.

Next page

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REFUSED ENTRY. Passengers who disembarked from the Westerdam cruise ship (left) get on a bus in Sihanoukville on Friday, where the liner docked after being refused entry at other Asian ports due to fears of the COVID-19 outbreak. Cambodia's strongman premier Hun Sen welcomed Friday the passengers of a US cruise ship blocked from several Asian ports over fears of a deadly new virus. At right, a bus with a driver wearing protective gear departs from Sihanoukville. In the background, the Diamond Princess cruise ship, which has around 3,600 people quarantined onboard due to fears of the new COVID-19 coronavirus, at the Daikoku Pier Cruise Terminal in Yokohama port Friday. AFP

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From A1

Panelo said the task force would also evaluate the possible lifting of travel ban on Macau.

"The Office of the President likewise stresses that any resolution relative to travel restrictions in connection with the COVID-19 shall be subjected to regular review by the IATF," he said.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III, meanwhile, said the government is considering a travel ban on Singapore to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The government earlier banned inbound flights from China, its special administrative regions Hong Kong and Macau.

Singapore has at least 58 cases of COVID-19 and has raised its health alert level to the same as during the SARS outbreak in 2002 and 2003. There are about 200,000 Filipinos in the island state.

The government's move came after Manila Economic and Cultural Office chair Lito Banayo said Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen met with her Cabinet and ordered the list of possible retaliatory measures against the Philippines for including their country in the travel ban.

Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy, decried its inclusion in travel restrictions aimed at China.

Duque clarified that the lifting of the ban had nothing to do with Taiwan's planned retaliatory measures.

He said the task force lifted the ban since there is no local transmission of COVID-19 in Taiwan, and the volume of travelers from Taiwan to Manila was also considered.

Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat welcomed the task force's decision.

"This is important to all tourism stakeholders. Many travelers transit via Taiwan," she told reporters.

The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in the Philippines welcomed the removal of Taiwan from the Philippines' travel ban.

"Taiwan has taken all measures needed to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019. Taiwan will continue to work closely with the international community, including the Philippines, to fight against the COVID-19 to safeguard the health and welfare of humanity," TECO said in a statement.

TECO also said Taiwan attaches great importance to its long-standing relationship with the Philippines.

"We are determined to strengthen our bilateral ties and promote our people-to-people connectivity," it said.

Banayo, in a separate statement, thanked the task force "for their open-mindedness that allowed the reconsideration of the travel ban on Taiwan."

"MECO and the 160,000 overseas Filipinos here are very thankful for their quick action, and the President for his openness and concern. Particular mention has to be made of the strong support from DOT Secretary Berna Romulo Puyat, (Labor) Secretary Bebot Bello, and National Security Adviser Jun Esperon as well as Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea for immediately convening the IATF," he added.

MECO likewise thanked Duque for "his appreciation of the strict protocols that we at MECO have undertaken to prevent any possibility of a spread of the COVID 19 contagion."

Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. on Friday said he opposed a travel ban on Singapore, saying a

prohibition should not be based on a country's recorded number of COVID-19 infections.

"We must look at the sturdiness or flaccidity of a country's demonstrated health and disease containment capability before so much as thinking of any action regarding access to and from it," Locsin said.

Earlier, senators urged the Health department to reconsider the travel ban on Taiwan.

Senator Richard Gordon said the people of Taiwan have been long-time friends of the Philippines.

"The two peoples have long-standing cultural and economic ties. Some Taiwanese people have made the Philippines their homes and many Taiwanese businesses have opened investments here. There is no justifiable reason to include the Taiwanese in the travel ban," Gordon said.

The Philippines, he said, is the third largest source of overseas workers to Taiwan, with a total of 157,487 Filipino migrant workers deployed there as of the end of 2019.

"This travel ban may imperil the hundreds of thousands of Filipino workers in Taiwan, jeopardize the economic initiatives already started here and affect our tourism industry," Gordon said.

"It would certainly affect our people to people relationship," he added.

House Speaker Alan Peter Cayetano also called for a review on the ban on Taiwan.

Also on Friday, Taiwan's labor ministry asked employers of Filipinos stranded by the ban to be considerate about the delays in their return.

On Friday, President Rodrigo Duterte urged Filipinos to travel and visit the country's tourist attractions as a way of

offsetting the estimated P42.9 billion loss that the Department of Tourism expects as a result of the COVID-19 scare.

"To my fellow Filipinos, I encourage you to travel with me around the Philippines. I assure you that everything is safe in our country, be it an issue of health, be it an issue of law and order, and be it an issue of accessibility," Duterte said in a video shared by Communication Secretary Martin Andanan in his Facebook page.

The President said airlines and hotels have agreed to lower their rates to encourage more Filipinos to tour around the country.

"Come with me and be my travel companion. I'll be traveling around the Philippines," he added.

In Malacañang, Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles said domestic travel would boost the tourism sector and cushion the impact of COVID-19 on the economy.

"If you can, just travel around the country because there are so many destinations that you can tour here," Nograles said.

Several tourist spots have temporarily stopped tourism-related activities in a bid to contain the spread of the virus.

Among the places that have barred visitors were Sagada in Mountain Province and Kabayan in Benguet.

Nograles, however, expressed optimism that the government would still meet its 6.5 percent growth target for this year.

Even if the first quarter growth will slow down, Nograles said domestic demand is still growing.

"The effects are usually short-lived and generally affect only the first quarter. Recent history has shown that the Philippine economy is resilient, given its robust domestic demand and production," he said.