



Face shields' fate up in air

Palace, IATF split on whether protective gear must be lifted or not

By Vito Barcelo, Macon Ramos-Araneta and Willie Casas

FACE shields need only be worn in hospitals, the Palace said Thursday, saying this was the new policy set by President Rodrigo Duterte.

The Inter-Agency Task Force, however, recommended to the President the continued mandatory wearing of face shields in enclosed and indoor spaces, including hospitals, schools, workplac-

es and commercial establishments.

"While waiting for the President's decision on the matter, the existing policy on the use of face shields remains in effect," presidential spokesman Harry

Roque said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Roque said the President agreed to make face shields mandatory only inside hospitals.

"The President did say that the wearing of face shields should only be in hospitals. All I'm confirming is the President said that and of course what the President said becomes a presidential policy," the Palace official said in a press briefing.

Roque made the remarks after Senate

President Vicente Sotto III, in a Twitter post earlier Wednesday, said Duterte has agreed that the public should only be required to wear a face shield when they go to hospitals.

Sotto, during a Senate Committee of the Whole hearing on Tuesday, noted that the Philippines is the only country in the world requiring the use of face shields in public spaces.

Earlier, Manila Mayor Francis "Isko

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Moreno" Domagoso also called on the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) to lift its policy mandating the wearing of face shields in all public places to ease the burden on the people.

Based on science, the use of a face shield on top of face masks gives an "additional protection" against COVID-19, molecular biologist Nicanor Austriaco said in a press briefing with Roque.

The IATF-EID in December last year made it mandatory for the public to wear face masks and full face shields in all public spaces to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Senator Juan Miguel Zubiri said he and other lawmakers met with the President Wednesday night, and they were told that they could take their face shields off so they could hear each other.

During their discussion, the President acknowledged that the Philippines was one of the few countries that still uses face shields in the fight against COVID-19, Zubiri said.

He also said that the use of face shields is more needed in hospitals or high-risk areas and jobs.

"Then the topic was focused on the need for face shields and if they were truly necessary," Zubiri said.

Also at the meeting were House Speaker Lord Allan Velasco, House Majority Leader Martin Romualdez, Senate President Vicente Sotto III, and Senators Christopher Go, Joel Villanueva, Ramon Revilla Jr., Ronald dela

Rosa and Francis Tolentino.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III said the Department of Health (DOH) would appeal the decision, saying now was not the time to stop using face shields while vaccination coverage remains low.

"Any layer of protection is better than less protection," Duque said.

Earlier on Thursday, Senate President Vicente Sotto III said Duterte has agreed that face shields must only be worn in hospitals.

Villanueva and Zubiri confirmed their conversation with the President, but said it was "off the cuff" and not an official discussion.

The declaration about face shields has highlighted the differences of opinion within the administration. Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles said that the wearing of face shields is still required, but on Wednesday, treatment czar and Health Undersecretary Leopoldo Vega said they may be removed when outdoors.

DOH spokesperson Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said Vega's statement "has always been the standing policy."

Face shields, she said, must be worn in enclosed public spaces, school, workplaces, commercial establishments, public transport and terminals, places of worship, and other public spaces in which the one-meter physical distancing is not possible and where there are more than 10 people gathered at the same venue at the same time.

Meanwhile, OCTA Research Group fellow Nicanor Austriaco said on Thursday that implementing a 10-day quarantine for incoming travelers in

Metro Manila and Cebu will be effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 variants in the Philippines.

Austriaco said this policy will prevent variants, especially the Delta variant that originated in India, from spreading in the country "like ink spreading in water."

He warned that the Delta variant is 50 percent transmissible than the original coronavirus strain.

"I would like to support the science in enforcing a 10-day quarantine for international travel in NCR and Cebu," said Austriaco, during a Palace briefing.

"Why? Because science shows that this quarantine is 99.7 percent effective at preventing variants from entering," Austriaco said.

Austriaco said he did not support calls to shorten the quarantine period because it would not ensure safety from the more contagious variants.

"I know there is a debate in our country on shortening the quarantine but there is no scientific evidence that a seven-day quarantine would protect us enough from the variant and if it enters Cebu, it will enter the entire country. It will be catastrophic and we will get another surge and it destroys Christmas this year," Austriaco said.

Instead of shortening quarantine days, he urged the government to "seek ways to verify quarantine status" of returning Filipinos.

Austriaco suggested allowing vaccinated Filipinos to bypass testing and quarantine, however.

"It is very expensive. It is difficult but it is a sacrifice for the Philippines because we have to protect ourselves from the Indian variant," he said.