



OFWs exempt from travel ban

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

FILIPINOS who have availed of the government's repatriation program amid the global impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic are exempted from the travel ban imposed on the entry of passengers from India, the United Arab Emirates and four other countries to prevent the entry and spread of the Delta (India) variant of the coronavirus.

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque made the clarification yesterday following a report that at least a thousand overseas Filipino work-

ers (OFWs) have been stranded in Dubai in the UAE since May due to the cancellation of flights going to the Philippines coming from India, UAE, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Oman.

The Inter-Agency Task Force on the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases has extended the travel ban until June 30.

"Let it be clear, however, that Filipinos covered by the repatriation programs of the government and repatriation activities of man-

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ning/recruitment agencies cleared by the Bureau of Quarantine are not prohibited from entering the Philippines. They can enter the country, subject to testing and quarantine protocols," Roque said.

He said the ban was necessary to "ensure continuous strict border control to prevent the Delta variant from reaching our communities and having community transmis-

sion. The abovementioned variant, first detected in India, is more transmissible as seen in the experience of other countries, thus there is a need for continued vigilance."

The Philippine Consulate in Dubai said it has not been able to facilitate the return of more than a thousand Filipinos due to the absence of Manila-bound flights.

Consul General Paul Raymond Cortes said the stranded OFWs are currently under the care of the

consulate and will be included in repatriation flights as soon as these are available.

Funds have been appropriated in the Bayanihan 2 law for the repatriation of OFWs who wish to return to the country and be with their families.

Available data shows that at least 325 Filipinos were repatriated last June 6, and another 300 last June 1 from the UAE.

Meanwhile, Sen. Panfilo Lacson

yesterday urged the government to fast-track changes to the current quarantine protocols for vaccinated returning overseas Filipinos.

Over the weekend, vaccine czar Carlito Galvez Jr. said the NTF against COVID-19 is looking at allowing OFWs and OFs who have validated vaccination records to be covered by the same quarantine controls as those who were vaccinated in the country.

Galvez, who has been battling for a vaccine passport system, said it was

important that the protocols are in sync with those of other countries to make traveling to and from the Philippines easier for returning Filipino workers and foreign investors.

Lacson said the government should speed up its review since "economic recovery cannot afford to wait."

"Please make it sooner, not later. Mind the economy for a change," Lacson said in a post in his Twitter account.

Lacson likewise expressed sup-

port to the Department of Health's reported recommendation to scrap the COVID-19 testing requirement for inbound Filipinos who have been fully vaccinated abroad. The proposal is still being studied by the government.

"Way to go! This is one sensible adjustment that our 'kababayans' abroad who miss their families here have been wanting to hear from DOH," Lacson said. — *With Raymond Africa*