



Face shields still mandatory

Duterte ends confusion, heeds experts' advice, cites Delta variant threat

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PRESIDENT Rodrigo Duterte on Monday said wearing face shields both indoors and outdoors is still mandatory with the raging Delta variant of the coronavirus, in a reversal of a Palace announcement earlier in the day and statements by government officials last week.

"I will apologize to the Filipino people... Many thought that we were ready to do away with [face shield]. But with this kind of infection that poses a very grave danger to... It's a small inconvenience, but that is a small price to pay," the President said in his weekly televised briefing.

Duterte also said he never said "with finality" that the government would do away with face shields, and was "just shooting the breeze" with some lawmakers who met with him over the weekend.

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"I cannot afford to place the nation, the national interest of the Republic by just sometimes adopting this and being lenient to this. I know it is very tedious, but it will really prevent a disaster," he added.

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In the same briefing, infectious disease expert Dr. Edsel Salvaña said the Delta variant, which was first detected in India, is four times more infectious than the regular or Alpha variant.

Salvaña said the country did not yet have transmission of the Gamma and Delta variants "and we want to keep it that way."

On the use of face shields, the doctor told the President: "It would be nice to have an extra layer of security... especially with the threat of the Delta variant."

"I am left with no recourse but to adopt your recommendation (to require the use of face shields)," Duterte replied.

Earlier, Presidential Spokesman Harry Roque said on Twitter: "Acting on the advice of health experts and in view of the Delta variant, PRRD declared that the wearing of face shields, both indoor and outdoor, is still mandatory."

Meanwhile, overseas Filipino workers who want to come home to the Philippines, despite a travel ban to keep out the more contagious Delta COVID-19 variant, should reach out to their manning agencies or the embassy in their respective areas, Malacañang said.

The Philippines has barred the entry of travelers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, United Arab Emirates, and Oman at least until June 30.

Filipinos who are part of repatriation efforts are exempted from the travel ban, Roque said.

Senate President Vicente Sotto III said Monday there should be some adjustments and improvements in the government's policy on returning Filipinos, OFWs and foreign investors coming to the Philippines who have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

"That's what we have been looking for because some have been fully vaccinated," said Sotto in a Zoom interview.

"We need not subject fully vaccinated Filipinos, even those visiting us, especially investors. We should not be too strict on those who are fully vaccinated already," he added.

In a related development, Chairman Benjamin Abalos Jr. of the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority reiterated the government's call on the public to be aware of the more transmissible coronavirus Delta variant that was first detected in India and is now causing a deadly surge in neighboring Indonesia.

Abalos noted that four OFWs who recently arrived from South Korea and Saudi Arabia tested positive with the said variant of COVID-19. The new cases bring to 17 the total cases of this virus type in the Philippines as of June 21.

"We can't ignore this Delta variant because even if you have one or two doses [of vaccine], it can hit," said Abalos in a press briefing at the agency's main office in Makati City.

In a statement Monday, the DOH, the University of the Philippines-Philippine Genome Center (UP-PGC), and the University of the Philippines-National Institutes of Health (UP-NIH) reported the detection of four additional Delta (B.1.617.2) variant cases.

It also reported 14 Alpha (B.1.1.7) variant cases, 21 Beta (B.1.351) variant cases, and one Theta (P.3) variant case based on the latest whole-genome sequencing report.

Just a few hours earlier, Roque said in a Palace briefing that the wearing of face shields was no longer required outdoors but must still be used indoors in places such as malls and crowded areas such as public markets, and in public transportation.

He said the Inter-Agency Task

Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) had appealed the President's earlier decision to do away with mandatory face shields except in hospitals, arguing that they provided an extra layer of protection against COVID-19.

Roque also said the President would issue a memorandum this week on the wearing of face shields, which was echoed by Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles.

Critics of the mandatory face shield policy say the Philippines is the only country in the world that requires the public to wear face shields to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus 2019.

"What is clear is this, the wearing of face shields is no longer required outdoors because this was not appealed by the IATF," Roque said.

He also said that people outside their homes should not be apprehended if they are not wearing a face shield.

Pending the President's decision, Roque said the rule on shield-wearing will stay.

"While waiting for the President's decision on the matter, the existing policy on the use of face shields remains in effect," he said.

Meanwhile, Senator Imee Marcos called on the government to get ahead of a global syringe shortage as purchases and donations of COVID-19 vaccines for the country increase by the millions in coming months.

"The purchase of 40 million doses from Pfizer is good news but will there be enough low dead space (LDS) syringes which are now in short supply in the United States itself?" Marcos said.

"Let's hope our own supply does not stop our vaccination program in its tracks," she added.

Marcos said more than three-fourths of syringes produced by the largest manufacturer in the Philippines are exported to North America.