



Variants crossing borders

TTrue to his commitments to millions of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), President Rodrigo Duterte reaffirmed the Philippine government policy to allow their return to our country despite travel bans during these risky times of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

The same policy is applied by our government to the rest of returning Pinoys and Pinays living abroad as immigrants or citizens of their adoptive countries or caught by the lockdown while on foreign trip.

The Philippines – like many of the COVID-impacted countries – has implemented travel bans and border controls to control the spread of this deadly contagion since its outbreak in March last year. Non-essential travels in and out of the Philippines are being disallowed, especially during the height of the lockdown, euphemistically called as enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) that was first imposed all over the country last year.

The quarantine classifications are currently recalibrated on granular basis, or area specific depending on the gravity of COVID-19 cases, especially with the local transmissions of foreign variants or mutations coming from other countries. The same applies with the travel bans regularly reviewed by the Inter-Agency Task Force on the Management of Emerging and Infectious Diseases (IATF-MEID).

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As of latest monitoring of the Department of Health (DOH), the Philippines now has 17 confirmed Delta variant that originated from India; 14 cases of Alpha, or the variant traced from the United Kingdom; 21 cases of Beta, or the South Africa variant; and 1 case of Theta or P3 variant first detected here in our country. The foreign variants were mostly detected from returning Filipino seamen who have crossed several countries on board their ships and return flights back to the Philippines.

After it lapsed on April 29, the IATF has extended the travel restrictions imposed on passengers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, United Arab Emirates and Oman until June 30 to prevent the entry of a more infectious COVID-19 variant.

Despite the extension, presidential spokesman Harry Roque reiterated in an official statement the policy of the Duterte administration to allow returning Filipinos and OFWs to come back home here.

"Let it be clear, however, that Filipinos covered by the repatriation programs of the government and repatriation activities of manning (or) recruitment agencies cleared by the Bureau of Quarantine are not prohibited from entering the Philippines," Roque stated anew. But like the rest of travelers entering our country, they are subject to swab testing and quarantine protocols, Roque added.



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A total of 403,234 overseas Filipinos had been repatriated by the government since the start of the pandemic, according to a Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) data. This number, however, did not indicate if it included Filipinos who got tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival here.

At an IATF meeting Monday night, the President announced the government will continue to impose the mandatory face shield in public venues, both inside and outside places. Also, the Chief Executive asserted the national policy to require swab testing and 10-day quarantine protocols for Filipinos and foreigners would prevail over local ordinances such as those in Cebu.

While there are clearcut guidelines on returning Filipinos and OFWs, it is a different story on many cases of Pinoys and Pinays who belong to the so-called cases of "binational families" who have been separated from their children and other loved ones. They still cannot enter or go back to the Philippines, not by choice but due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, they have DFA Secretary Teodoro "Teddyboy" Locsin Jr. as champion of family reunification bids. Despite being one of the IATF members, the DFA Secretary could only do so much speedy action for their specific cases within his agency jurisdiction.

As DFA Secretary, Locsin implements the Philippine policy entry restrictions through visa issuances on those traveling from countries with localized COVID-19 transmissions. Exempted from this rule are Filipino citizens (including foreign spouses and children); holders of permanent resident visa; and holders of diplomatic visas issued by the Philippine government.

But there are other government agencies involved in this process such as the DOH; the Bureau of Immigration; the Department of Tourism (DOT); the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), especially involving travel of children or minors; and, Philippine embassies or consulates in the countries concerned.

The most crucial document needed by foreign nationals wishing to enter the Philippines is the EED, or entry exemption document they must secure from our embassy in their home country. A foreigner cannot apply for Philippine visa without EED.

Locsin's assistance is much sought after also by similarly situated Filipinos who are unable to get married as their foreigner fiancés cannot enter the country. Through his personal Twitter account @teddyboylocsin declared: "I am going around appealing. Will never give up," Locsin vowed. "Don't break my heart. Harder for me to work to get you all united," he promised on his Twitter post at the height of the lockdown in the Philippines in July last year.

In reply to cries for help, his standing order to the DFA legal office: "Find all ways to get around the ban, especially all ways these couples can get married to enter our country."

The dangers of COVID-19 contagion, especially with the more deadly variants can not, however, be overly romanticised. But with anti-COVID vaccination, the risks are much less.

With foreign variants of COVID-19 unfettered by travel bans, Filipinos as well as foreigners coming in from abroad must still undergo swab testing and quarantine upon arrival in the Philippines even if they are already vaccinated.

