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Vaccine or jail? Gov't execs clarify Duterte's threat

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

PRESIDENT Duterte has threatened to jail those who would refuse to get vaccinated against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as he expressed exasperation over Filipinos who continue to ignore his government's call to get protection amid increasing cases of more infectious variants.

The President, in his weekly Monday night address, Duterte said he would ask local government officials to prepare a "tally" of those who are not yet vaccinated or those who refuse to be vaccinated so he can have

them "sequestered in jail" as they become potential carriers of the COVID-19.

He said everyone is a potential virus carrier, which is why it is important to get inoculated.

"For as long as you are here and you are a human being and can carry the virus, be vaccinated otherwise I will order all the barangay captains to have a tally of the people who refused to be vaccinated," he said in mixed Filipino and English.

"I'll task the DILG (Department of Interior and Local Govern-

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VACCINE

ment) to do that, to look for these persons. If not, I will order their arrest... Why? Because if you are a person not vaccinated, you are a potential carrier. To protect the people, I have to sequester you in jail. You choose: be vaccinated or I will detain you in jail," he added in mixed Filipino and English.

The President said he would "think it over very hard, legally" as he called those who refused to be vaccinated "fools" and

asked them not to force him to take extreme measures such as being jabbed with Ivermectin from their behind.

"Don't get me wrong, there is a crisis in this country," Duterte said. "I'm just exasperated by Filipinos not heeding the government."

Duterte's remarks contradict those of his health officials who have said that while people are urged to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, it was voluntary.

Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra yesterday expressed belief the President

merely wanted to stress the need for Filipinos to get vaccinated.

He said there is no law compelling vaccination.

Guevarra said as a lawyer, Duterte knows the authorities cannot just apprehend anyone who refuses to get the COVID-19 shot.

"I believe that the President merely used strong words to drive home the need for us to get vaccinated and reach herd immunity as soon as possible. As a lawyer he knows that not getting vaccinated is a legal choice, there is no law as yet that compels vaccination

against COVID-19, much less criminalizes it, as presently available vaccines are still in their trial stage," Guevarra said.

Guevarra stressed though that not getting the vaccine is different from not following health protocols.

"Getting vaccinated is not mandatory but complying with health protocols is mandatory. There is no law or ordinance that penalizes non-vaccination

but there are existing laws and ordinances that penalize non-compliance with health protocols," he said.

Asked if Duterte asked for his opinion before making such pronouncements, Guevarra said the former "seeks my legal opinion only when he finds it necessary."

Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said the national government could compel the people to be vaccinated, but a law or local ordinance is still needed to arrest and penalize those who would refuse to be vaccinated.

He also acknowledged that vaccine supply is still limited but said the government is trying to encourage the people to be protected.

The Department of Health said prior consent remains a requirement for those looking to get inoculated.

Health Undersecretary Myrna Cabotaje issued the statement after Duterte's threat which she said may have been "borne out of the passion and need of the President to emphasize the point that we need to get inoculated to help us move on and be able

to protect one another."

"As the President said, no one is safe until everyone is safe. He wants safe and effective vaccines for all Filipinos," she added.

As of June 21, DOH data shows some 8.6 million vaccines administered, including 2.1 million second doses.

At the House, Bayan Muna Rep. Carlos Zarate assailed Duterte for his threat.

"They're a failure and yet President Duterte has the gall to say that he would jail those who refuse to get vaccinated. This is another militaristic solution. Filipinos want to get vaccinated but the system is slow and inept that's why it's taking too long," he said.

"The real issue now is that many Filipinos want to be vaccinated but there are no or scarce vaccine supply. The vaccine rollout of the Duterte administration is also very slow and the vaccines being used are largely direct donations and from the COVAX Facility of the World Health Organization," he said. — *With Ashzel Hachero, Wendell Vigilia, Raymond Africa and Reuters*