

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY PINKY WEBB - THE SOURCE, CNN PHILIPPINES
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WEBB: Secretary Roque, welcome to The Source, thank you for your time.

SEC. ROQUE: Good morning Pinky, good morning Philippines.

WEBB: Highly and likely, what is your response when ask about the possibility of an extension of MECQ? Even the President sir, said during his address to the nation the other night na wala na daw pera ang gobyerno. Secretary Roque, does this mean that sigurado na po tayong babalik sa GCQ by August 19?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, Pinky, I am only the Spokesperson of the IATF, of course I can't preempt the IATF. But the realities on the ground are number one, the funds intended by Congress for ayuda or Social Amelioration Program, for those who are living in areas which are under lockdown because of ECQ or MECQ have been already used by the DSWD. And although I personally called Congressman Villafuerte to include ayuda for the families affected in Metro Manila and in the nearby adjoining provinces for two-week ayuda, I am not sure if Congress will be able to include it in the Bayanihan 2 package 'no.

So, I still have to check. It was not in the senate version; we try to insert it in the house version but I don't know if it's there and I don't know if it will be approved by the bicam. So, we are not certain, if congress of course provides for ayuda, for Metro Manila and these four provinces then the situation may change. But as far as the President is concerned, we have used up already the ayuda provided by congress. And as you know, under our Constitution, we can't spend public funds without the law 'no, appropriating for such money.

WEBB: So that means, Secretary, in the event that, possibly sir, makahanap ng pera or congress adds additional funds for the social amelioration program that is one factor that could possibly allow President to reconsider the extension of this MECQ?

SEC. ROQUE: That is one, but there is also number two. Of course, its data that will decide whether or not or data that will guide the IATF in deciding what its recommendation to congress will be. And the last time around, the recommendation was for GCQ, albeit with localized and granular lockdowns.

And again, I would like to stress that even if the numbers are rising continuously, number one the case doubling rate which is the most important actually that we look at for the classification remains to be under GCQ qualification. Meaning that, it's not under one week, it

in excess of one week - nine days in fact. Number two, despite the facts that the numbers have been increasing, notice that we have not actually exhausted our critical care capacity.

And I think credit go to Usec. Vega, because under the One Hospital Command Center, he operates all the hospitals in Metro Manila as if it's one entity preparing patients to X hospital, if Y hospital is not available because of bed unavailability. So, that's the important thing to underscore. Then of course the usual fact that only 1.5% gets severe and critically ill of the illness and an overwhelming majority, like 98.5% of our people, even if they are afflicted with the virus have very mild or asymptomatic.

WEBB: Yesterday, and we always talk about this Secretary Roque, when we look at the numbers, you always tell us not just to look at the number of infections, we need to talk about case doubling rate, that's one. The other one is the mortality rate another one will be the Ro (Pronounced as R naught). I heard you yesterday, sabi nga ninyo sa Ro, nanggaling tayo sa 1.7, ibig sabihin, one infect, one positive. If we were to round it off, dalawa iyong infected and that has gone down, you said from 1.7 the Ro, bumaba na iyon sa 1.2. So, ibig sabihin, noon one positive will infect one person.

But, the numbers still need to be looked at because if - yesterday we had an additional 3,000 and the day before 7,000, the day before that probably, 3,000, the day before that 6,000 - I learn, sir, that we averaged about maybe 3,000 or 4,000 a day. And even if you say at 1.5 ang critical and severe at 4,000 that would be I don't know, sir about 45 maybe severe and critical each day. My question is, I wonder, but 1.5, sir so that's more than 40. Can the hospitals accommodate this, because if that is more than 40 a day, sir and baka po mapuno na iyong wards at iyong ICU beds?

SEC. ROQUE: That is why, I said, this One Hospital Command Center is a brilliant idea of Usec. Vega and that has enabled us to coordinate very well where to send patients. But in addition to that, Pinky, we are of course exerting double time in building more isolation facilities, because the isolation facilities will free up hospital bed wards and number two, we are also rushing, in this August, we are about to finish the 250 bed capacity in East Avenue Medical Center which will be devoted just to COVID 'no. And this is this August already 'no. and that's in addition to another 500 bed isolation capacity that we are building in the land where Nayong Filipino is supposed to be, to be paid for by the private sector, and East Avenue Medical is also going to be equipped by the private sector.

So, in addition to having a reliable system of referrals which is the One Hospital Coordination Center, we are also rushing more ICU bed capacity in particular, it's not just in East Avenue, it's also in Quirino and—Quirino Memorial Hospital, as well as, if I am not mistaken, in PGH as well we're building also 20 additional ICU beds in PGH.

WEBB: But while you talk about that, Secretary Roque, all that is forthcoming. Some have happened and others are forthcoming, even for example the quarantine facility that Secretary Villar was talking about yesterday. I think that's about a 200 bed facility and that is going to

open on August 17. The point I am trying to make, sir, is that if that opens on August 17, if all works well, possible pong ma-delay iyan just like the other quarantine facilities. These are the factors we need, sir, habang patuloy na dumadami iyong kaso natin on a daily basis.

SEC. ROQUE: That's correct 'no. But the One Hospital Coordination Center has integrated the bed capacity and critical capacity of the adjoining provinces. So, we're not just looking at hospital capacity in Metro Manila but also around Metro Manila.

And what I'm saying is, considering that the next classification is good for two weeks, we have not reached actually our hospital or critical care capacity and we could probably do away with the further lockout given that we're only talking of two weeks. And in two weeks' time, the facility in East Avenue, which is 250, is about to open so that will be a big relief 'no. And what is important is for us to be ready to provide medical care for the 1.5 that will be severely or critically ill because of the virus.

So far, we had no problems. We've not had to put patients in public places. All hospitals have been able to take in their patients, sometimes there are lines in the ER but they are still being accommodated.

WEBB: One hundred forty thousand cases as of Tuesday, 139, almost 140,000. And Senator Risa Hontiveros was reacting to the 7,000 cases a day before. She said this should serve as a wake-up call for government because daw hindi nako-contain ang pandemya at hindi rin nako-contain iyong pag-spread ng virus. What is your reaction to that, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we do the best that we can. Number one, we recognize that there is a continuing community transmission. And I'd like to point out that we've actually done a good job at containing it somehow given that we have the highest population density in Southeast Asia, and I'm talking of Metro Manila in particular.

And when we talk of very high population density, you're talking about sometimes in really dense areas where the impossibility of social distancing. So we've been able to manage so far.

Number two, relative to the rest of the world, you know, we are in Number 22 but we are not as bad as countries that we consider as role models, including the United States which has now the highest number of cases and the highest number of deaths. And even with countries of our size, like Brazil which is now Number 2 and Number 3 worldwide, we're still doing a lot better.

Now, on a per density basis, if you were to compute the number of cases on a per million basis, Singapore would still be number 1. They would have something like 4,000 cases per one million given their very small population of six million. And the Philippines is actually, we're not bad although we're second, but it's a far second, of a thousand plus more or less per million.

So I'd say, we're doing the right thing. And I keep on emphasizing 'no because everyone knows how accurate the UP forecast is. Without the earlier lockdowns which we took advantage of to improve our critical care capacity, we would have 1.5 to 3.5 million as early as June of this year, which did not happen. So that's context by which people should evaluate how well government has responded to this challenge.

No country in the world is perfect in dealing with coronavirus. And I would say that we've done very good so far in containing it and more so in limiting the deaths arising from coronavirus.

WEBB: So we're addressing this, sir, and yet you have, for example, a daily in Thailand, a newspaper in Thailand saying that Filipinos arriving there coming from the Land of COVID. Again, I know that there is more to this but when you look at Southeast Asia, we are Number 1 in terms of infection. When you have so much so, I guess, a reputation as such, sir, it doesn't seem to... I guess, sit well. It's definitely not a good impression overseas.

SEC. ROQUE: You know, that's correct and I can't deny it. But there is also no way we can control what our neighbors say. But do not forget that we are fierce competitors with Thailand when it comes to Tourism. So I'm sure their statement that we are the Land of COVID is also motivated by the fact that they are struggling to invite people to come visit Thailand again. And of course, they're worse off in so far as they have a bigger tourism industry than us 'no, so that's the context by which we should listen to this comment coming from our ASEAN neighbors. We are the closest of friends but we're also the closest competitors as far as economic interests are concerned because we're dealing with exact same commodities and in the case of Thailand, it's tourism in particular.

But what is important is people to know the overall context of how we're doing. We're still Number 22, which is still not bad given that we don't have the same resources available same as the United States has. And we now have the highest testing being conducted in Southeast Asia. And although I'm not sure if we're the highest in Asia now, we have even exceeded the testing done in South Korea and in Japan. And I can't really underscore how important testing is because it's the only means by which we could detect those who are positive to enable us to trace, as well as to isolate them 'no.

So given that in January we only had one molecular lab, I would say that after a couple of months, five months, the fact that we now have more than 101 and we're able to test almost ... in excess of 32,000 people a day now is quite an accomplishment.

WEBB: We'll be taking a very short break. The Source will be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

You're watching The Source on CNN Philippines. I'm Pinky Webb. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

Russia already announcing that they developed and approved the first coronavirus vaccine that they call Sputnik V. President Rodrigo Duterte said that President Vladimir Putin had offered a free vaccine, or free vaccine rather, to the Philippines. But Secretary Roque, there are concerns on the safety and even efficacy of this virus. Number one, should the Philippines, if it gets here sir, proceed with caution regarding this vaccine?

SEC. ROQUE: Well you know, the good news is the Russian have declared that they have a vaccine 'no. Whether or not we could actually use it will depend on compliance with our existing laws, because we have a statute which penalizes the use of any drug without prior approval of the FDA and before the FDA could approve it, the universities will have to conduct clinical studies to prove that it has no adverse effects 'no.

So it is good news but it still has to go through our local processes, because we can't do away with them. The only way that it can be sold on a commercial basis I suppose, is if the FDA were to classify it as for compassionate use, which it has on a limited basis, some of the drugs that are available already for COVID-19 but I don't think it can be okayed on a mass use on the basis of compassionate use 'no. So it will still have to go through the process.

That goes for any vaccine that's developed anywhere else in the world 'no and that is why as early as now we have been cooperating not only with WHO but with individual countries that are racing to develop the vaccine to help also in the worldwide clinical studies to be conducted.

But what I'm saying is the President was very appreciative, he was grateful, he underscored that one of the natures of the Visayan is iyong konsepto ng 'utang na loob' - debt of gratitude, and he already recognizes that he has a debt of gratitude because Russians considered us first for their vaccine. Whereas in the past, until he actually came up with an independent foreign policy, if Russia had developed this and we did not have the same kind of ties that we do now with Russia, they would not have offered it to us.

WEBB: In fact the President even went on to say that para daw wala nang haka-haka, siya na daw iyong mauunang magpapa-vaccine once this is available in the Philippines. Would that be without, sir, knowing its safety and efficacy sir, should the President even really have offered to do that?

SEC. ROQUE: Well I think it was perfectly fine for him to offer it because that's his way of telling the people that, "I want us to have a vaccine and I have to be the guinea pig for it, I don't mind." And because that's the attitude of the President 'no, he's old, he's at the end of his term he can sacrifice his life for the Filipino people.

But as to whether or not PSG will actually allow him is a different thing 'no because already we know that even in the last SONA, after his address, he wanted to shake hand with the members of Congress and PSG did not allow him 'no. So it's difficult to be president because

in a way you have limited your freewill 'no. The PSG is there to guard you and they are very good at doing their job.

WEBB: The thing is, Secretary Roque, we don't want to have false hope. So if the President says that Russia is giving us some free vaccine, President Vladimir Putin says this is already approved in Russia and yet we know that it hasn't gone through the third cycle of clinical trials. That actually, sir, there's so many questions on that and even time, because it needs to go through a third phase of trials that may take a while, hindi ho ba?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I don't think it's false hope because with the President saying that he wants to be injected with it, I think the FDA would have to go out of its way to fast track the clinical studies that are required and it can be done anyway 'no. So you know, the words of the President constitutes actionable policy and it's a signal also to our local FDA to do everything and anything it can to make sure that it can be administered to the President safely.

WEBB: Oo. Pero do you, personally kayo ho ba, do you have also doubts or suspicions on this because it was supposed to have been approved in record time, it was done in less than, I think two months of human testing?

SEC. ROQUE: I don't know because I'm not a doctor, I'm not a scientist. But when the President said that he will do it, I said like raising my hands and I'll go second 'no because it's the only way actually that we could find closure to this problem of COVID-19, having a vaccine 'no. But let's allow the FDA to do its job because after all, that's why the lawmakers established the FDA.

WEBB: Has there been an official request - would you know - from the Philippines regarding this vaccine?

SEC. ROQUE: We have officially thanked the Russians for their offer and the President signed the letter of gratitude publicly on TV, it has been sent to President Vladimir Putin. I don't know if it has been actually received by him but as you know, the President has become close personal friends not only with our more immediate neighbor China but also with Russia as well as the leader of the United States, President Trump.

So, this independent policy being pursued by the President has also given rise to have very close friendships between the President and world leaders.

WEBB: Just to clarify that, but you don't know of there has been an official request made?

SEC. ROQUE: What request for what? That the President be vaccinated or—

WEBB: For the vaccine, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we welcome it of course—

WEBB: No, no, no. For—to request—

SEC. ROQUE: Request for what?

WEBB: Go ahead.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, the letter itself we published it. So, it was an expression of appreciation and then of course that we accept the offer of the Russian government.

Now, having said that, there's still an issue of whether or not it's actually going to be free. The President understands it will be for free but for clarifying it if in fact it would be for free, so, let's also wait for that clarification.

WEBB: Ang rinig ko sabi ni Pangulo noong isang gabi, sir, libre. But anyway, we'll be taking a short break, we'll be right back.

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WEBB: Welcome back to The Source. Sec. Roque, Gen. Morales I interviewed him a few days ago and he said that he submitted his medical leave to his boss. If I were to assume his boss, sir, I would think that would be the President. Any information sir, if the President has accepted this medical leave of Gen. Morales?

SEC. ROQUE: I have no information if he has or whether or not he actually tendered his leave to the President because they are a GOCC. I think the procedure is for him to send it to the board because the board is the policymaking body of any corporation.

Even in terms of appointment, the President does not actually issue an appointment, he issues 'It is my wish letter' that someone were to be appointed. So... but it is the President that will issue the appointments for the individual board members.

So, as far as the fate of Gen. Morales is concerned, the President has said, 'I believe in his integrity, I believe he is a soldier of courage and of principles.' But he will await the results of the task force. He has said that I don't care if you were my political supporter, I don't care if you're close with, if you're corrupt then you will have to go.

So, let's allow the process to continue given that the task force was given only a very short period of time within which to conclude its investigation - 30 days. We expect that in the next 30 days there will be decisions to either impose preventive suspension, lifestyle check or outright suspension given that all the agencies concerned that could suspend and terminate and charge individuals within the bureaucracy are present and made members of the task force.

WEBB: The thing is you have, you know, Sec. Lorenzana, you have Sec. Guevarra already stating their position that maybe it's best for Gen. Morales rather to take a leave. What do you think, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Alam mo kasi si Presidente is really a very kind person. Lalong-lalo na may sakit si Morales, he will not add pressure to Gen. Morales and I think that's a good trait that the President is not a bad one. It's up to Morales what he wants to do but the process of investigation will continue.

But meanwhile, he has said I believe that he is a man of principles, particularly his record during the RAM days, he's a man of guts. But he wants to await the decision of the task force that's why he created it in the first place.

WEBB: Secretary, I have one minute left really, the wife of the late Randy Echanis, iyong kaniya pong asawang si Erlinda appealed yesterday to the President to intervene para daw maibalik na sa kaniya ang remains ng kaniyang asawa. Will the President heed her appeal?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it's being investigated now. It's not just the police investigating it; it's the NBI now through the Department of Justice. So, again, you know, on matters where there's police investigations or criminal investigations being conducted it is very difficult for anyone including the President to interfere.

So, he will allow the process to continue and even on the claim of the body because there's question about the identity, we now have modern technology that would guide us. It need be I'm sure they can undergo or adopt DNA technology, DNA Science to find out the true identity of the remains na pinag-aagawan ngayon. But I think the President as a lawyer will allow investigators to proceed unhampered.

WEBB: Thank you to Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Take care, sir!

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you and good morning!

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