

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY KARMINA CONSTANTINO/DATeline PHILIPPINES/ANC
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CONSTANTINO: Secretary Roque, good afternoon to you. Welcome to the program.

SEC. ROQUE: Good afternoon, Karmina. And good afternoon to all our viewers.

CONSTANTINO: All right. First thing off, are you feeling okay, no symptoms?

SEC. ROQUE: No symptoms. It's really just precaution. I technically did not have close contact because I was in the same car for about 40 minutes total. But I always have my mask and my shield on even in the car.

CONSTANTINO: Okay. Now let's get down to business. Are we all set, February 15, is that going to happen or is it going to be on a later date?

SEC. ROQUE: Well as you know, we are 100% ready to implement the vaccine program. The only issue is when the vaccine will actually arrive 'no. And as far as the actual date we're actually dependent on the COVAX Facility.

I'd like to explain that the difference between the COVAX Facility and the vaccines that we purchased is that we don't control the actual movement of the vaccines under the COVAX Facility because it is a separate facility from the window that the Philippine government used in purchasing our own vaccines.

So, we would have to await notification from COVAX, when they will actually ship the vaccines. But as everyone knows, we have already had a dry run, simulation already from the airport to the destination of the vaccines which means that by February 15, we are 100% ready not just to receive the vaccines but also to initiate our vaccination program.

CONSTANTINO: Okay, February was the date that you mentioned only in terms of readiness, it's not as if the vaccines are with us already and inoculations will start?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I am not giving up on the vaccines arriving on or before February 15, because the date we communicated in the official letter of the COVAX Facility said mid-February and we are still hoping. In fact, it's not just the airport personnel and the DOH that are ready, but most of the logistics company that are already ready.

CONSTANTINO: All right. Give us a clear picture here. How is all going to go down? Is it going to be nationwide or it's just going to be focusing on NCR first?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it has to focus on NCR, Cebu and Davao first, because we are dealing with Pfizer. We are expecting the Pfizer vaccine to arrive first and because it requires sub-zero temperature, there's of course geographical limitation, because we only have sub-zero facilities in Metro Manila, in Cebu and in Davao.

And in the simulation held yesterday, we simulated not just delivering the vaccines to RITM and to PGH, Lung Center as well as to the Tala Leprosarium but we also simulated transporting the vaccines from Manila to Cebu and Davao.

CONSTANTINO: All right. But the simulation is only up to a certain point. From that point of origin these vaccines would have to make their way to the vaccinations sites, have you simulated that as well?

SEC. ROQUE: Well right now, the vaccination sites will be the hospitals where they will be received, because the initial Pfizer shipment will be intended exclusively for medical health workers.

CONSTANTINO: But I am thinking more of you know... you gonna get these vials to the hospitals, the transportation of that and the stocking of that as the vaccinees come, has that been thought off as well?

SEC. ROQUE: We actually had simulation already in the individual hospitals, where they simulated actual conditions when they vaccinate individuals. So, it's not just simulation from the airport to the storage facility of the individual hospitals, it's also from the storage of the individual hospital to the end user. So, that's been done.

CONSTANTINO: How many doses are coming n again from the COVAX Facility, 117,000 only?

SEC. ROQUE: 117,000 from Pfizer and about 5 million from AstraZeneca.

CONSTANTINO: And both will come at the same time from the COVAX Facility?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, they are not arriving at the same time, they will be arriving separately. But I think we are expecting the Pfizer vaccine top arrive first. And in addition to that we are also expecting within a month about 600,000 dosages of donated Chinese vaccines. This is separate from what we ordered. This is what the Chinese Foreign Ambassador promised that President that they will be donating.

CONSTANTINO: Okay, but that went through the FDA even if it was just a donation?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it's a donation, but of course, like Indonesia, because what happened in Indonesia was they received first the vaccines if it will arrive soon but they cannot administer it without EUA.

CONSTANTINO: Correct. So, that's going to have to go through the FDA first?

SEC. ROQUE: Of course... of course.

CONSTANTINO: You can't just use it on the public?

SEC. ROQUE: That's correct. In fact, in Indonesia they waited about a month before the Indonesia's regulatory authority gave it an EUA as well.

CONSTANTINO: And if let's say our FDA says it's not up to standards, we are not going to take it, we're not going to risk the public, we'll going to have to return those?

SEC. ROQUE: Definitely! But the vaccines, I think, will be donated to us have also been approved and given EUAs in other countries.

CONSTANTINO: All right. All the vaccines that are coming in, Secretary Roque, will these be enough to cover both jabs of these vaccines – for example, Pfizer has two jabs, right? – will this be enough to cover both jabs for the vaccinees?

SEC. ROQUE: Certainly. We have about 1.4 million health workers, even if we have expanded it, let's just say it's about 2.5, as I've said we have enough for 2.550 individuals because we're expecting five million plus 170. So, we would have enough to cover all our medical frontliners assuming that both Pfizer and AstraZeneca arrived within this quarter.

CONSTANTINO: So, we are not going to have that situation wherein you administer the first jab and then you move on to the next sector and then leave the first sector hanging in case there's a shortage of vaccines. We're going to have to finish that sector first?

SEC. ROQUE: That's the plan. In fact, we made that very clear that although we have other sectors lined up, we will finish first and administer the vaccine to all medical frontliners .

CONSTANTINO: Okay. Herd immunity, Secretary Roque, is not only attained by the number of those vaccinated but also by the consistency by which this number is attained. Momentum is key here. When and where will the next vaccine shipment come from?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, you see, bulk of the vaccines will be coming in the second quarter, so by the second quarter we absolutely will not have any problem as far as supply is concerned because by the second quarter, we're expecting not just Pfizer and AstraZeneca, we're expecting Novavax, we're expecting Sinovac, and even Moderna to arrive in the Philippines. And this is of course in addition to the ongoing clinical trials that we're having and one of the companies that will have a clinical trial, I think beginning this quarter, is J&J

CONSTANTINO: So, can you categorically confirm to us that there will be no gap? That this vaccination campaign will be consistent throughout?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, what I can confirm is that we're aiming to vaccinate 100% of our adult population by the year 2021 and it's just a matter of some vaccines arriving first but bulk of the orders will kick-in or will come in the second and third quarter of the year.

CONSTANTINO: Okay, let's shift gears now. Representatives Stella Quimbo together with Speaker Lord Allan Velasco, they filed Bayanihan 3 bill – I'm sure you know about this – it's worth, I think, P420-billion. The aim is to boost consumer spending and help small businesses, but Malacañang has already spoken, it's rejecting this. Why is that so, Secretary Roque?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, let me clarify, we're not actually rejecting it, we're thankful that it was filed because it is a policy initiative that we may have to resort to. But right now, we're not sure if we should implement it yet because number one, 25% of Bayanihan 2 still has to be spent and number two, of course, we have trillions of pesos in stimulus package embedded already in the 2021 Budget. What we're saying is we'd like to thank Congress for this initiative because when and if we need to tap it, certainly we will resort to Bayanihan 3.

CONSTANTINO: All right. Still has to be spent, is the President getting—isn't the President getting frustrated about this? I mean, the money is there but it's stuck somewhere.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, to begin with, it is 25% 'no. So a bulk of the money for Bayanihan II has been spent. I don't think there's any justification for not spending it at the time when people need it, but let's just say that we need a little more time to spend it and that's why Congress passed a law to extend the validity of Bayanihan II.

CONSTANTINO: All right. So as I said, there is money but it's stuck somewhere, what is the President's sentiment regarding the delayed payout of benefits and allowances to health workers? That's been in the news—I think it was earlier this week, it's been in the news latter part of last year, middle of last year, and yet we claim that these are frontliners, these are the new heroes in this pandemic. What's the President's sentiment regarding that, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, heads have rolled when the benefits for medical frontliners were in fact delayed; individuals were suspended by the Ombudsman. And I think people in the Health department should learn by way of example that if they don't want to suffer the same or [garbled] their fates, then they have to payout soon.

CONSTANTINO: Yeah, but it keeps on happening, Secretary Roque.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, as I said 'no, yesterday this was asked. I'm in the process of communicating now with the finance section of the Department of Health. We're verifying if in fact there's a delay, and we're reminding them that people have been suspended for the delay and that more people might be suspended unless it is forthcoming. But let's give them time to answer first.

CONSTANTINO: Okay. Let's go back to Bayanihan II and III. We heard from Senator Grace Poe as well, airing her concern, she wants to know where the funds will come from, for Bayanihan II and III eventually, if that's also passed? Where will you source these funds?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, that's a factor to be considered and that is a factor being considered by Secretary Dominguez. And that is why while we appreciate of Bayanihan III, we're saying, perhaps, it's a bit premature as of yet 'no.

Right now, the policy of the Department of Finance is even if we have very good credit rating, we can readily get credit and we can get it at a very good rate, we're not actually borrowing as much as Congress would want to because we want to ensure that there will be fund to borrow in case the pandemic lasts longer than expected 'no.

So the policy of Secretary Dominguez is to remain in the middle as far as borrowing is concerned. We're not following the footsteps of some of our neighbors such as Malaysia which have borrowed heavily because we want the flexibility to have the money when we actually need it.

CONSTANTINO: Thirteen trillion, that's the total now of the **debt** because of this pandemic. This administration is not going to be around to pay off that debt, but does it have any ideas to how that debt can be paid off?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, Karmina, in terms of actual figure, that's big. But if you compare it with other nations, ours is a modest amount. Remember, it's not just the Philippines that found itself confronted with COVID, but the reality is other countries relied more heavily on borrowings to finance their COVID response compared to the Philippines.

So we're in the middle. So that's a big amount but we're not actually amongst the biggest borrowers for COVID financing right now.

We have actually been very conservative in our borrowings and I think it would pay off, and it has also been reflected 'no in the trust given to us in terms of credit worthiness.

CONSTANTINO: Okay. Just a final question before I let you go, Secretary Harry. About the President's latest remarks against ABS-CBN. We heard what he said, I just want to know what triggered that latest outburst?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I think, I heard as much as everyone did. It had to do with the report made by, I think, a sitting member of the DBP which said that in the past ABS-CBN disposed of its liabilities, as well as its assets to a SPAV [*Special Purpose Asset Vehicle*] and eventually re-acquired it 'no. And the allegation of that particular official is that there was breach of the anti-graft laws of the country. While the President said that he would rather refer the matter to the Ombudsman for investigations – so that is where it is right now. He has left it to the

Ombudsman to investigate. If the process of assigning its assets and liabilities to a SPAV and eventually re-acquiring the same assets breached any of the anti-graft law of the [garbled].

CONSTANTINO: All right. So you said, he has left it to the Office of the Ombudsman to investigate. But he also said that he will tell the NTC not to allow ABS-CBN to operate in case—

SEC. ROQUE: Investigate, yes.

CONSTANTINO: In case it's given a franchise by Congress. How do you then reconcile both statements coming from the President, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: That is correct. That is something that the President also said. But as far as criminal prosecution is concerned, I think the President has been very clear – he leaves it to the Ombudsman to investigate.

CONSTANTINO: We have to leave it at that. Secretary Harry Roque, thank you for joining us today. You keep safe.

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