

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY PINKY WEBB – THE SOURCE/CNN PHILIPPINES
APRIL 5, 2021 [9:02 A.M. – 9:30 A.M.]

WEBB: Let's go straight to the source of the story, we have Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Secretary Roque, good to have you back on the show. How are you, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Good morning and Happy Easter.

WEBB: Happy Easter. Secretary, let's start with the extended ECQ, of course I heard your announcement on this last Saturday. Can you first tell us, what were the factors that were considered that led to the extension of the ECQ?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it has always been based on a formula 'no that we look at the average daily attack rate as well as the two-week average attack rate of the different cities and one municipality of Metro Manila, together with the healthcare capacity. And right now, both the attack rates and the healthcare capacity are still at critical levels 'no and hence the decision to extend ECQ. But we're following a model, Pinky 'no, prior to the ECQ that we imposed, we had a one week travel bubble in NCR Plus and we're looking at another week of MECQ after this week assuming our prevention, detection, isolation [garbled].

So if the PDITR strategies work at the end of the two-week ECQ and another week of MECQ, we should be looking at around 4,000 cases daily. Of course, the additional ECQ was imperative in order to allow our health workers some breathing space 'no because the sharp increase in cases of course also resulted in an increase, a tremendous increase in the number of moderate and serious cases that required hospitalization.

WEBB: There are some portions, Secretary, I didn't quite hear. So, we're looking at—ang sabi ninyo ho noong Saturday ang minimum of one week ano po. What does government want to achieve considering this week, this extended week of ECQ? Considering that if we look at the past three days of the infections, we were logging at over 10,000.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, what I said was in the model that our DOH experts are following, if we impose another week of ECQ in addition to the bubble and the one week of ECQ that we've had already, and if we were to impose another week of MECQ, we are looking at around 4,000 cases a day 'no which is a tremendous reduction from the 12,000 that we have right now 'no. And of courses because of the critical care capacity of all our hospitals, it was indispensable 'no that we give our hospitals a breathing space and that's why there was a decision to impose another week of ECQ.

But the estimate is after the two-week of ECQ and another week of MECQ, we might be able to reduce the number of cases by around 4,000 a day.

WEBB: But let's say this week, this week of extension, how much do you think reduction in terms of numbers first of COVID infections are you expecting to see?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, actually we have—if we just do one week of ECQ, then we would be only looking at—wait ha.

We have different scenarios 'no and the scenario that I quoted of 4,658 is if we were to do an additional week of ECQ and then MECQ after – that's 4,658 'no.

But if we were to do ECQ and until April 11, and then GCQ then the number would be substantially more 'no. I actually have it in another phone 'no, but the numbers, if it's just another week of ECQ would [garbled] double the 4,000.

So it's indispensable that, number one, during this period of ECQ we intensify our Prevention, Detection, Isolation, Treatment and local governments for this purpose were give a score card of sorts to measure 'no, to have a basis for self assessment on the extent that they have implemented this PDITR strategies. Now this PDITR strategies include Dharavi like house-to-house search for symptomatics and subjecting them to testing, as well as to isolation.

And of course [garbled] intensive testing is part of the strategy, we have already authorized in the IATF the use of at least 500,000 antigen testing kits, 3 brands of which have already been validated by the RITM to complement our RT-PCR tests.

WEBB: Okay. I wanna go to that a little later on, Secretary. But first this also, what would you say were the gains of government the past week, the first week of ECQ if at all there were any?

SEC. ROQUE: Well we're about to find out, because the tangible results of the bubble takes two weeks. And in fact the data that we will obtain from last Easter Sunday would be the first manifestation of how effective our travel bubble was 'no two weeks ago 'no because there's a waiting time of two weeks before we can see results 'no.

But I think the gains is, number one, because we have limited the movement, definitely I think starting this week we would be registering lower numbers; and number two, because of the limited lockdown, we have also enabled our health capacity to improve.

As in fact today, we are inaugurating 110 ICU bed capacity in what used to be the Quezon Institute 'no. It's still is the Quezon Institute but it's now converted to an ICU facility for COVID cases 'no. And in addition to that, we are about to inaugurate next month a further 160-bed ICU capacity 'no in at least 2 existing hospitals. These are modular ICU bed capacities 'no.

So again, the decision to impose this lockdown is to enable us to improve our healthcare utilization rate and we have done so.

WEBB: And because you mentioned that, I wanted to talk to you about the hospital capacity. There have been—I'm sure you also read it and you hear about it, so many heartbreaking stories everywhere, whether it be through text on Facebook or even Twitter, families desperately looking for hospitals to take in their COVID positive loved ones. So you already mentioned that there will be additional 110 beds in the Quezon Institute, right?

Secretary knowing that this is happening right now, hindi ho ba kulang iyong 110 na idadagdag na bed capacity?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, kulang po iyan 'no, kaya nga po there has been a decision already made by the DOH 'no that they will build modular ICU bed capacities 'no. We have identified at least two sites to build these tents basically for ICU patients 'no – one of which is in Taguig, the property of a GOCC corporation and then the other is in the PICC area 'no, in the parking lot of PICC 'no. There are modular ICU bed units that are readily available and we are looking at constructing these 'no. In addition, the DPWH continues to build modular facilities 'no utilizing container vans 'no.

So we are improving healthcare capacity by using technology and we expect that in addition to the 110 today, we are estimating no less than 500 additional ICU bed capacities very soon.

WEBB: Secretary, we just need to take a very short break. We will be right back.

[COMMERCIAL]

WEBB: You're watching The Source on CNN Philippines. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

So, Sir, we're talking still about hospital capacity. I wanted to share something that I look into in terms of the critical and severe. You know, this is something we've talked about over and over again, but if we look at the numbers – at about .6% critical and .6% severe – these may seem small, but if we are rounding out the number at about 10,000, that would be more or less, you know, a hundred, maybe a hundred ten severe and critical patients on a daily basis. I'm not sure if that would be the right way to compute this, but it seems to me that that would be an additional hundred ten cases every day at 10,000 of severe and critical patients, I just wonder how our hospitals would cope with numbers like that?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, in addition to the modular hospitals that we're building now, we are also relying now on telemedicine 'no. There's quite a number of hospitals, both public and private that have now opened the web pages where patients can actually consult with physicians, online. Knowing that there's not enough space, particularly for the mild cases, in our hospitals right now.

We are also encouraging those who have mild or who are asymptomatic to avail of our temporary treatment facilities because in the TTMFs where I stayed, we also have doctors monitoring the patients twice a day. So we are encouraging everyone, those who are not actually in serious conditions to please avail of the TTMFs facilities. These are hotel facilities where we have medical personnel rather than going to hospitals.

WEBB: And when it comes to healthcare workers, I'm sure you've heard that at the Orthopedic Center, there are over a hundred COVID positive healthcare workers. Those are doctors, nurses and possibly even technicians at that. What could happen to them because I saw a report that nahhirapan po sila kasi, number one, the isolation facility at the hospital is only good for about less than 20. Some of them can't go home because naka-dorm po sila and they share it with other people. Is there a plan, for example, for the healthcare workers at the Philippine Orthopedic Center?

SEC. ROQUE: Those who could not be accommodated in the isolation facilities of Orthopedic have been accommodated in a TTMF facility which is a hotel. I understand about 46 of them have already checked in into one of these TTMFs nearest the Orthopedic 'no.

Of course, they are given priority. And in the TTMF's facilities, as I said, there's also medical facility and these are actually two to three-star hotels which are very comfortable. And all of those who tested positive in the Philippine Orthopedic have now been given a slot in an isolation facility either onsite or in a TTMF facility.

WEBB: And that's free?

SEC. ROQUE: Oo, as far as health workers augmentation is concerned, we have learned from the past that one strategy that we need to implement is to recruit health workers from adjoining regions where the numbers of COVID are more manageable, and we are now doing that.

We have increased our recruitment by around 60%, and this was the report of Usec. Vega as of last Saturday. In addition to that, Secretary Duque is now coordinating with the PMA to harness the private doctors who may provide [garbled] free services also in the temporary treatment facilities at the very least so that the specialists can concentrate on the severe and acute cases.

WEBB: There is a suggestion from some sectors to publish hospital occupancy, the words are "real time" because if you look into the stories and what is being told on social media even and even reports, sabihin po natin, Secretary, 80 or 90% occupancy rate – I think the last was 90% occupancy rate in the hospitals – yet you have patients, loved ones of families, going around every single hospital. They say, ten, eleven, twelve hospitals in NCR, and they can't seem to find a hospital na puwedeng ipasok iyong kanilang loved one, iyong kanilang miyembro ng pamilya.

Help us understand the situation, why is that so when government says it's 90% occupied, there must be 10% where they can go. But it seems ha, it seems as it appears wala na ho silang mapuntahan.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, that's why we have the One Hospital Command Center. Before going to a hospital, my strong recommendation is, call the hotline of the One Hospital Command Center so that they will tell you where to go. Unless you call the One Hospital Command Center, then you would have to go from hospital to hospital looking for a slot.

Now, I'd like to highlight that the problem right now is that particularly as far as private hospitals are concerned, they have allotted only 20% of their capacity to COVID patients; and government hospitals have allotted 50% of their capacity to COVID patients. So the slots for COVID patients are really limited especially if you go to a private hospital.

So my very strong recommendation, call the One Hospital Command Center so that they can tell you where to go because going from hospital to hospital simply will not be good for the patient. Call the One Hospital Command Center.

WEBB: But, Secretary, nadagdagan na ho ba iyong tao doon? Because I remember Usec. Vega saying that on an average of maybe 70 calls a day – and this was about five days ago – that has increased to about 400 plus, and people can't seem to call it or they are on standby for such a long period of time. Would you have any idea if there is additional manpower or even lines in the One Hospital Command that have been established?

SEC. ROQUE: I was instrumental actually in increasing the telephone lines to the One Hospital Command Center if you will remember 'no in one of my press briefings—

WEBB: I do.

SEC. ROQUE: — I called the telecoms provider 'no. If we need to contact the telecoms provider again for more lines, we will do it. But as far as manpower is concerned, I don't think we have a problem with manpower because we are harnessing the entire bureaucracy of government for this purpose, and even the private sector because these are manned actually by private call center operators 'no.

So if the problem is additional telecom facilities, we will make arrangements again to increase the number of lines so that anyone can access the One Hospital Command Center.

WEBB: You did that the last time, I do remember, during your press conference, that very moment you called on the Pangilinan group and the Ayala group to add more hospital lines doon po sa One Hospital Command because that was one of the challenges of Undersecretary Vega. But I think, Sir, he also mentioned that human resource is also a challenge for them.

SEC. ROQUE: We'll look into that because I know we're utilizing private call center's operators for this purpose who are experienced in dealing with this line of business. But I will check with Usec. Vega what else he needs so that the Palace can give the necessary assistance.

WEBB: Okay, just one more issue on the healthcare workers. I know you said that those coming from the less, well, siguro where the cases are very low, we can expect augmentation from them. I think si Senator Bong Go also said that some healthcare workers from the Visayas will be coming to NCR.

My question is, do you know how many healthcare workers from the provinces will augment the human resource here in NCR and when?

SEC. ROQUE: I don't know the exact number. But last Saturday, we had a special meeting precisely with Executive Secretary and Senator Bong Go outside of the IATF meeting. And that was where Usec. Vega said that they were able to hire 60% of their target personnel. So I will get the actual numbers but the percentage is what I remember from what Usec. Vega said, and this is rather good recruitment process of hiring 60% of the required number.

Now, the 60% I think are even full-time plantilla positions 'no. So I'm not sure about how many he has been able to recruit for temporary positions. I will find out.

WEBB: Positivity rate is at 23, sometimes 24%. That means one of four individuals who are tested end up being positive. I know mentioned a while ago that antigen test, 500,000 of those have been purchased by government to augment the testing of government. But I was looking at the data in the past couple of days, I know sinabi ni Secretary Vince Dizon that we are at almost 50,000 test a day.

But when you talk to experts, they say what we really need to do especially with the one out of four positive infection, we should be testing about 100,000. Is this possible?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, that is what we are trying to do 'no. If not a 100,000 we need to jack it up by at least 90,000 'no. And in addition to the use of antigen test, in the last IATF meeting an appeal was already made to RITM to validate as quickly as possible the saliva PCR test, because saliva PCR test is half in cost at least to the normal PCR test. And what we are aiming of course is to double the number of PCR test that we are conducting and because if it was half as expensive as the normal PCR, then we can do a 100,000 instead or the current 50,000 in addition to antigen test.

WEBB: And in fact, pinayagan na po iyan ng government, pinayagan na rin po ng FDA. But so far, it's the Philippine Red Cross doing the saliva testing.

All right, we are going to talk about a government's ayuda. Will they expect another round after this almost 30 billion pesos released by government? We'll be taking another short break. The Source will be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

WEBB: You are watching The Source on CNN Philippines. our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

I wanted to add this, Secretary, iyon pong tent para lang we are very clear on this, na sinasabi nga kailangan bayaran ng 1,000 per hour at hindi pasok sa PhilHealth, just for again clarification. What is the government stand on this?

SEC. ROQUE: It should be covered because the tents are preparatory to admission; and of course, as soon as they checked in the tent, they are actually under the supervision of the hospital already. So, I do not know who said that it should not be covered. But of course, we will clarify this matter with PhilHealth.

WEBB: But that is already the directive of government, kailangan po covered na siya.

SEC. ROQUE: Kailangan covered na po siya, because the tents are temporary waiting facilities prior to actually being given a bed but they are already being given treatment at the tents.

WEBB: So now we go to the government assistance, iyon pong ayuda. Supposed to be, idownload na ho ito sa mga LGU today, so it's clear 1,000 or a maximum of 4,000 per family. Is there a directive from government on when or a deadline by which LGU should be able to distribute this to their constituents?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, of course government wants it should be given as soon as possible. Initially it was supposed to be given in kind, but the President's thought it could take too much time. That's why we have been silent on how it was going to be distributed, it can be done in cash or in kind, but I think the growing consensus at least amongst Metro Manila Mayors is that they will give it in kind.

But the President just wanted the local government officials to have some leeway 'no, if they have readily available goods then why not, if that is the fastest way. But right now, I understand that many of them will just give cash.

Now, the idea is, give the cash this week because we understand that this is already the second week of ECQ. But one thing going for us is the ECQ last week coincided with Holy Week where the workers only lost about two to three days of working days.

WEBB: Right, so now begs the next question. Magkakaroon po kaya ng additional ayuda dahil nga nag-extend na naman tayo ng one week of ECQ; is the government even considering it?

SEC. ROQUE: The government when we distributed or when it was decided to distribute P4,000 per family considered already that the ECQ would be for two weeks. And the reason is, of course during Holy Week, they only lost two days of working days effectively.

So we believe that—although it's never enough 'no, this will tide over our countrymen for this additional ECQ and that is also a consideration on whether or not there will be a third week of ECQ.

Now, Secretary Wendel has said that under the existing budget we have no further source for ayuda. But if there is need for further ayuda, then Congress will have to be called into a special session, because it is in recess and we would need to get a supplemental budget for that purpose. But for the time being, it will be the P23 billion released already will be the totality of ayuda that the people would get.

WEBB: There is a tweet from Senator Ping Lacson. I would like to ask for your reaction if you will: *The coronavirus has gone berserk. While it is 'on at-will' mode, we are like on autopilot. We can't feel someone is in charge. Sobrang malas! We have repeatedly urged the President to change the crew or at least the captain, even pass a resolution in this regard.*

Just a reaction on that and is there any chance or any consideration for the President to adjust or change some members possibly of the IATF or will it remain as is?

SEC. ROQUE: You know, Pinky, what's clear is until February 22, we have effectively managed COVID-19 in this country. And of course, all the scientists will confirm that what happened is that we are now dealing with a virus which is different from the virus that we saw in March. The B.1.1.1 is a different virus already; it has mutated and it has become more virulent and more infectious.

So what I am saying is until the virus mutated, we managed it very well. We were number 30 worldwide; we are still number 30 worldwide, which only proves to show that all other countries in the world are facing the same predicament, the virus having mutated and having become more infectious. In fact, we are not the only country under lockdown right now, there's at least ten other countries that are also lockdown as a result of an increase infectiousness of these new variants.

So, I think to be fair, we have employed the entire government approach, the entire COVID response is not dependent on the Secretary of Health, it is dependent on all the Cabinet secretaries including the DOH and under the leadership of the DOH in close coordination also with the WHO.

WEBB: Secretary, one issue, I wanted to raise - I have one minute left ano - this exchange between Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana and the Chinese Ambassador on the issue—

SEC. ROQUE: I can't hear you, it's garbled now. This is the problem (garbled)

WEBB: Secretary, let me try again, can you hear me better now?

SEC. ROQUE: I can't hear you, but please repeat the question.

WEBB: Okay. I on pong exchange between SND and the Chinese Ambassador regarding these 40 Chinese militias at the Julian Felipe Reef. I just wanna ask you, mayroon po bang plano si Pangulo—I know that—let me just add, sir, si Secretary Locsin says he may consider a demarche protest. So, does the President or is the President planning to call the Chinese Ambassador again to discuss this issue?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, you know we again—it's probably not the accurate term, because the first they met it was a social call and the President their incidentally brought up the issue of the fishing vessels.

Now the status right now is under the qualified political doctrine, of course the President stands by the statements of our Secretary of Defense. But I hasten to add that the President has been clear that this is not an issue that will lead to war between friendly nations. We are hoping that our friendly relations will soon resolve this latest impasse.

WEBB: Okay, we ran out of time. Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, sir, maraming salamat po sa inyong oras.

SEC. ROQUE: Maraming salamat at it's always a pleasure. Good morning.

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