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INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY PINKY WEBB – THE SOURCE, CNN PHILIPPINES
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WEBB: We have Presidential Spokesperson Secretary Harry Roque. Secretary Roque, welcome to the show sir.

SEC. ROQUE: Hi. Thank you very much Pinky and thank you for this opportunity to explain what I think really is a wrong statement attributed to me.

WEBB: Okay. So let's start with that, sir. It's good you can explain this to us, because from my understanding, what you said was government has no program yet to conduct mass testing due to lack of resources. Please explain sir and was there anything wrong with what I said?

SEC. ROQUE: Well actually, that was taken out of context 'no because the question to me asked by your reporter and by Joseph Morong was in connection with the DOH policy on whether or not employees are required to undergo COVID testing as a pre-requisite for going back to work 'no. And I said that the protocols of the DOH does not require COVID testing as a pre-requisite to go back to work, but it doesn't mean that if the employers want to test them, they're prevented from doing so.

We're encouraging our employers to test them and that is why one private initiative Project ARK has in fact earmarked no less than a million rapid test kits 'no to test the employees of the private sector.

But it's not accurate to say that we don't have the mass testing policy. Let me underscore the following Pinky 'no. Number one, no country in the world tests every citizen, that's a fact. So what we are doing is we're trying to follow the best examples that we have and right now we're trying to follow the footsteps of South Korea; and that is why the goal is to test 1.5 to 2 percent of the total population

We can't test 110 million persons, but in any case, no country in the world will test every single citizen that they have 'no. In the press conference, I cited Wuhan because in Wuhan they're attempting to test everyone 'no, 11 million residents of Wuhan—

WEBB: That's right, they are.

SEC. ROQUE: In the context of I said, we can't do the same thing in Metro Manila perhaps 'no. But we are doing 1.5 to 2 percent testing which is what South Korea is also doing.

Now perhaps the better term is not mass testing but it should be targeted testing ‘no, because I think it’s physically impossible to test 110 million but we’re aiming to test, also using statistics as a science ‘no, 1.5 to 2 percent of our population.

Now having said that, we also have one of the most stringent testing protocols in the whole world ‘no. All OFWs are subject in fact to PCR testing not just anti-body testing ‘no, whereas in other countries and I’m sorry that we didn’t have the time to upload our Power Point presentation here, in other countries they will only test those who have symptoms ‘no. But in the Philippines, every OFW that comes home has to be tested PCR and meanwhile while waiting for the results, they have to be quarantined. And in addition ‘no, it’s PhilHealth that pays for the cost of this PCR testing.

So quite clearly ‘no, I think it was an inaccurate report because what I did say was in response to a question on the DOH guidelines on COVID testing and until now, there is no such rule that employees will have to present COVID test results before they can be allowed to go back to work.

WEBB: Okay, Secretary. So it’s good, let’s clarify that – that was an answer in context to a question about private companies, if it’s mandatory for private companies—kung mandatory sa mga kumpanya na i-test iyong kanilang mga empleyado and the answer to that is no. So just to quote you sir, kasi ang lumabas as much possible, this is what you said, ini-increase natin ang capacity ng testing natin kaya nga we’re aiming na aabot tayo sa 30,000 a day.

Pero in terms sa mass testing na ginagawa ng Wuhan, na all 11 million residents, wala pa pong ganiyang programa at iniwan natin iyan sa pribadong sektor. So, what is the plan of government, Secretary Roque, at ano po ang ipinaubaya ng gobyerno sa private sector?

SEC. ROQUE: Well ito nga po eh, that’s in the context of whether or not it is a requirement for employers to give COVID testing to their employees. Now despite the fact that we are not requiring it, the private sector perhaps to gain confidence ‘no for whatever purpose that they may want, has undertaken this voluntarily and that [garbled] I said, well of course government is not about to discourage [garbled] because the more testing is better.

Now, although you know perhaps what we have to admit is that we are still building up our testing capacity ‘no. Until now, we are aiming to test 30,000 persons a day which is similar to what South Korea is doing and admittedly we’re still far from that ‘no. But that’s why we’re rushing the building of labs and today in my press briefing, I’m going to announce that there’s another private initiative ‘no where’s another private company has undertaken the building of instant laboratories kumbaga ‘no, to increase our PCR capacity.

WEBB: I see. So we’re sticking to, sir, what have we been talking about this whole time that the goal really is 30,000 tests a day hopefully by May 30 kung mangyari po ito. So, that the plan is really to stick to the 30,000 a day?

SEC. ROQUE: Nagga-garble ka ngayon...

WEBB: Sec. Harry, so ang plano ho talaga ay maabot natin iyong target na 30,000 a day. Iyon nga po ang plano ni Secretary Vince Dizon. Okay. Secretary, sakali pong maabot natin iyong 30,000 tests a day, ano ho kaya iyong mangyayari doon sa ilan pa nating mga kababayan who will not be able to undergo testing? Sinasabi ninyo that the private sector comes in to, iyong iba ho nagkakaroon po ng testing sa kanilang mga empleyado.

SEC. ROQUE: Well this is the rapid testing program of Project ARK 'no, but I have to say that the private sector has also been rather generous in contributing to the government's efforts to increase its PCR capacity 'no. Now Secretary Vince Dizon who is the T3 czar, the testing, tracing, treat czar has also said that the private sector has been donating PCR machines so that government can increase its PCR capacity, we have donated mega swab facilities.

So ever since the testing initiative of the government has been done in conjunction with the private sector. And I think the reason is because businesses know that the economy cannot reopen without, you know, significant number of our population being subjected to testing. And that is why we have been also generous in sharing their resources in upgrading our PCR capacity.

So from the very beginning, it has really been a public-private partnership as far as testing is concerned and I think this is for good reasons because testing is the only way we could determine where the enemy is 'no, as far as COVID-19 is concerned.

WEBB: Secretary Roque, is government going to be comfortable with the 30,000 tests a day kung maabot po natin by May 30 or is there a plan of government to even ramp this up further?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we're hell-bent on achieving it 'no. Of course we have missed prior targets 'no, we said that by April 30 we would have 8,000; we did not meet that. We eventually met it 10 days later. So you know like all goals, we aim to do everything that we can. But in this case, I think Secretary Vince Dizon is really hell bent on achieving that capacity, 30,000 per day by the end of May because it's urgent 'no. Now that we have opened up the economy, we need really to isolate, locate and cure those with COVID-19 before the economy can really open any further.

WEBB: So plain and simple, we're sticking to the 30,000 a day for now because hopefully maabot po natin iyon by May 30. All right, we'll be taking a very short break. We'll be right back with Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WEBB: Secretary Roque, so, last night nag-trending po sa twitter iyong masstestingph. Some were saying and I hope you can address this, paano na daw iyong dalawang buwan na

lockdown kung wala din naman daw pong matutuloy na mass testing, hindi ba daw masasayang iyong dalawang buwan na lockdown, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Siguro mali iyong paggamit nga ng mass testing, it should be targeted testing. Uulitin ko po na wala naman talagang bansa sa buong mundo na tine-test iyong lahat ng kanilang mamamayan. Kinakailangan lang ay makapag-test ng 1 to 2% at parang – alam mo how they conduct iyong mga voter's preference – magkakaroon na kasi ng tayo benchmarks.

WEBB: Surveys.

SEC. ROQUE: Statistical sample 'no kung ilan talaga iyong mayroong percentage na afflicted with COVID. Pero tayo nga, we are expanding as much as we could, and number two, we are relying on both PCR and anti-body testing, which the private sector and LGUs are now resorting to. And we understand of course that although PCR is a gold standard, eh kakaunti pa nga lang ang ating laboratory, so ngayon po 30 laboratories pa lang tayo at mga 12,000 ang capacity natin per day na maliit pa rin in relations to the total population.

Kaya nga ine-encourage din natin iyong paggamit ng anti-body testing and the President no less, has authorized the use of anti-body testing. Why, because wala nga tayong sapat na PCR, number two, it's cheaper and faster, kasi in 10 to 15 minutes mayroon ka nang resulta. Pero kinakailangan po na iyong anti-body testing eh ginagamit pa rin in conjunction with PCR. So, ang paggamit po ngayon sa iba't-ibang daigdig kapag ikaw ay nag-test ng positive sa anti-body testing ay nagkakaroon ng confirmatory test using PCR na siyang nire-recommend din dito sa ating bayan.

Ngayon po kasi iyong mga private companies at ilang mga LGUs ay already utilizing anti-body test kits. Now, even if it is being undertaken by the private sector and the LGUs, this forms part of the bigger testing policy of the government, kasi ang testing po talaga is one area na from the very beginning has been conducted by both the public and the private sector together.

WEBB: Alright, Secretary Roque, just maybe a last question on this. Ano ho ba ang pinakamalaking challenge o pagsubok sa target testing? Are you gonna start calling it target testing, Secretary Roque? So, let me stick to that target testing. Pondo ho ba, may pera po ba ang gobyerno, equipment po ba, iyong supplies, iyong swab test, iyong PCR machines or is it all that sir, o may problema po ba talaga sa pondo.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, hindi naman namomroblema sa pondo, kasi nga whatever government does not provide, the private sector is more that willing to provide. Kaya nga po paulit-ulit ako, pati po iyong ginagamit ng gobyerno na PCR sources, karamihan po diyan, binibigay din ng private sector. Kasi nga po, alam natin na habang wala kang vaccine, habang wala kang gamot sa COVID-19 talagang ang ating sandata lang laban sa COVID ay testing, isolation and treating 'no.

So, ang problema lang po kasi is bago itong COVID. Bago itong COVID, hindi tayo nagkaroon ng ganitong problema before, so bago rin iyong teknolohiya para mag-test at siyempre po dahil bagong teknolohiya, bago iyong mga kinakailangang laboratories, mga reagent at lahat po iyan ay we had to start from scratch, dahil wala naman talaga tayong preparedness for a disease that we did not expect to strike us. At ang buong daigdig naman po is also coming to terms with same problem. Kaya nga lang, may mga countries who are better at manufacturing the kits than others. Itong mga kits pong ito, kasi ay patented in Germany, in Netherlands, in the US. But all which or most of them are still made in China too and in South Korea.

So, parang kakaunti lang talaga po iyong mga countries na nagpo-produce ng kits, reagents at iba pang mga accessories, kaya we have to compete with the rest of the world. I think money is not the problem, it's also a supply problem, kasi nga po lahat ng countries in the world know that they only viable strategy is to test, isolate and then cure.

WEBB: Very quick answer, sir. Just your reaction to what happened over the weekend and even yesterday po on the easing of the ECQ to moderate ECQ, sir. So many people were out. How do you see the next couple of days unfolding?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we have made a warning po na alam naman ninyo iyong ating pagpunta sa MECQ that is very flexible po and that is temporary. Government is still guided by the doubling capacity, iyong pagkalat ng sakit at saka iyong kapasidad natin to provide critical care. So, kapag nag-increase na naman po iyong doubling capacity ng sakit and we don't really have enough critical care capacity to treatment, baka babalik po tayo sa ECQ – its, the only way to control still the spread of the disease.

So, ang pakiusap ko po, although we need to open the economy, ito naman po ang dahilan kung bakit tayo nag-MECQ, kinakailangan pa rin sundin pa rin iyong social distancing at iyong basic health considerations. Dahil kung hindi po ay talagang mapipilitan tayong bumalik sa ECQ, mapipilitan na naman tayong mag-lockdown. Dahil iyan po talaga ang sandata natin ngayon habang walang vaccine, habang walang gamot sa COVID-19.

WEBB: Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Sir, maraming salamat po sa inyong oras.

SEC. ROQUE: Salamat po magandang umaga po.

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