

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
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INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY KAREN DAVILA – HEADSTART, ANC
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SEC. ROQUE: [Recording starts] I could not officially confirm it because although I was told about it, I was told about it, in fact I think, it was Monday 'no, I could not announce it until I had basically the copy of the appointment paper as released by the Executive Secretary, and I understand we got the copy just this morning. So I announced it also this morning.

DAVILA: Okay. So is it fair to say that Aaron Aquino was informed that he would be replaced before Wilkins actually posted it, I think—what I read is he posted it on his social media page.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. Mr. Villanueva beat us to it because as I said, our procedure is we can't officially announce until the papers have been released. But I guess in his excitement, he posted it in his Facebook. But I can assure you that this is not a case of loss of trust and confidence or anything, he will just be given a new assignment.

DAVILA: Okay. It's quite interesting these changes right in the middle of the pandemic, so you have Aaron Aquino, and also Kristoffer Purisima of the Office of Civil Defense, he was fired for loss of trust and confidence. What did Purisima do that essentially made the President lose his trust?

SEC. ROQUE: Well I'm not privy to it 'no, so the only instruction I got from the President himself was that, there was loss of trust and confidence 'no. And then of course in the case of Undersecretary Rio, he had long resigned and the President gave instructions in fact to congratulate Undersecretary Rio for a job well done and that we are hoping that he will finally enjoy his long deserving retirement.

DAVILA: Oo. Although Rio before, he actually left DICT. He did—there was a bit of a controversy on alleged 300 million pesos that was spent for something else. Do you plan to address this?

SEC. ROQUE: No. You know, it was his resignation acted upon by the President, so that's it. Perhaps, as human beings, perhaps it's quite obvious that there was some kind of discord between him and the Secretary. But you know when you're undersecretary you have to work very close with the secretary. But I think in this case, he just wanted to retire as well.

DAVILA: Okay. Now all 17 Metro Manila mayors are already calling for GCQ come June 1. What is the likelihood of that Secretary Roque, we are talking about maybe 3 or 4 days from now?

SEC. ROQUE: Well today, IATF is meeting and we expect a decision to be made by the body. It's very difficult for me to actually speculate because as Spokesperson, I have to wait for the collegiate body to decide which is different of course when we're talking about General Galvez who is Chief Implementer and Secretary Año who is DILG Secretary, because more or less, they give their recommendations to the IATF. But I can quote both of them that chances are we will in fact be transitioning to GCQ in Metro Manila according to the Chief Implementer and the DILG Secretary.

DAVILA: Oo. And if Metro Manila goes on GCQ, this will actually be a big change for Metro Manila. Are we saying Secretary Roque, we'll have public transportation? Will the MRT and LRT be opened by that time, because you'll have more people going to work?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. Well, fortunately there are other areas that have been in GCQ and we know already what's going to happen. As far as public transportation is concerned, there will be 10 to 50 percent capacity of public transportation. So all transportation will be operational but operating on 50% capacity which is why

it's important that employers including government although everyone will go back to work, still finalize their scheme whereby only 50% will actually work on situs and the rest can work from home 'no. So we are appealing in fact to both private and the public sector to ensure at least 50/50 workforce. It doesn't mean that work stops because I think by now we're used to working at home, you're broadcasting from home, I'm interviewing from home – it can be done.

DAVILA: Uhum, okay. In terms of the Bayanihan Law Secretary Roque, both Houses of Congress are willing to extend the Bayanihan Law for 3 months but NEDA Chief Karl Chua, in a forum said it should be extended until the end of the year to give the President flexibility to fight against COVID. Ano po bang extension ang nais ng Malacañang kung mayroon man 'no, kung gusto po ninyo?

SEC. ROQUE: [Laughs] The truth? Until 2022 but [laughs]...

DAVILA: Okay. Bakit naman, bakit po 2022 ang—go ahead.

SEC. ROQUE: Well no, no, no. Actually it was Secretary Dominguez who said that, and yes 'no because the reason is, we don't know when the vaccine will be developed. We don't know when the cure will be developed 'no. But I think—so that's why he said it in gest, he was laughing 'no, so I'm clarifying that I'm also laughing 'no because of course extraordinary power is something that is reserved for extraordinary circumstances.

But the problem here with COVID is, without the vaccine, we'll never go back to normal and it's still extraordinary. But I think given the scheme of separation of powers 'no, I think it will be unreasonable really to expect until 2022. I think the 3-month period is ideal, although what Secretary Karl Chua suggested is not too far away from the 3-month period because we're already in June 'no. So July, August, September is... 3-month is September and you have another 3 months 'no until December.

But the important thing is, if Congress gives us 3 months, 90 days, they will still be in session when the emergency power ceases because they are still in session in September and they can give the emergency powers anew to if they wish to and if Malacañang would request.

DAVILA: Oo. So tama po ba Secretary that Malacañang, between the two, you'd prefer at the end of the year, iyong gusto ni Karl Chua na lang?

SEC. ROQUE: Well it's not a preference but I think it definitely is necessary to give us at least 90 days and we'll see from there if at the end of 90 days, there's a need for emergency powers still, then it can be extended until December.

DAVILA: Oo. Do you only want specific provisions to be extended like the realigning of the budget, faster procurement, moratorium on loan payments, grace periods, etcetera 'cause the Bayanihan Law is quite extensive? Is it only certain provisions on the powers of the President or all of it?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, the Bayanihan clause contains a sunset clause, 3 months from date of effectivity 'no. So if it's going to be extended, Malacañang would like to see that the bill itself, the sunset of clause will be amended to provide for the extension of the emergency powers conferred by the President.

DAVILA: Oo, okay. And maganda rin to clarify Secretary Roque, I have spoken to—in a 'May Puhunan' Facebook banter, I have spoken to many people and they've said that they've only received SAP, some of them, for 1 month. Is it right to say that May is already ending, the local governments should have already downloaded the 100 billion pesos budget for SAP? Is this correct, Sec.?

SEC. ROQUE: We're going to amend the way the second tranche of SAP will be distributed. We're primarily availing now of electronic means, so most of the beneficiaries will be receiving through electronic means, no longer through local government units 'no. And the rest who opt to receive them in cash, that's where we will physically distribute them anew with the assistance of the Armed Forces, but still with coordination with the local government units.

DAVILA: Oo. So based on that, it's right to say that the 100 billion pesos that was allotted for May has not yet been downloaded by the national government? Tama, Sec.?

SEC. ROQUE: Tama po, because the memorandum from Malacañang authorizing the disbursement of the second tranche was only issued Friday of last week 'no. And not a whole lot will be downloaded to local governments anymore because we're hoping that bulk of it will be transferred electronically to the beneficiaries.

DAVILA: Okay. So this explains why the government's release of the COVID response budget has only been 40% at this point, that's the reason?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, but given the mode of distribution now chosen by the DSWD, I think it will be a lot faster compared to the first one. And secondly, 12 million of the beneficiaries are the exact same beneficiaries from the first tranche anyway and we're only dealing with 5 new names 'no of beneficiaries – 5 million new names.

DAVILA: All right. Now President Duterte also said no vaccines, no schools. The Health Secretary earlier said it was safe to reopen August 24 and then he corrected himself and agreed with the President. But Senator Sherwin Gatchalian has endorsed for plenary approval of a measure seeking to allow the reopening of classes beyond the August—

SEC. ROQUE: *[overlapping voices]*.

DAVILA: Oo. So this is a major confusion for many parents, Secretary Roque, especially those without online access – maiiwan talaga ang mga anak nila. What is the President open to, in terms of public school resumption, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Well as of yesterday, I talked to Secretary Briones 'no, although I told her to also do her own press briefings on these 'no, and the President is correct. We will never allow/expose our children to any form of danger. So it's been very clear although we are preparing for August 24 openings, that is actually based on the assumption that it will be safe to do so for the children.

And what do I mean by that? It means that there's no more community quarantine enforced. Because for as long as there is a community quarantine, schools will remain shut. So in other words the assumption is by August 24, we would be under a new normal 'no. Remember we have dahan-dahan, unti-unti, hinay-hinay... ECQ, MECQ, GCQ, MGCQ and then new normal. So, the assumption is by August 24 there would be a new normal and that's why we'd have to prepare, kasi naman pupuwede na no preparation at all.

Now, having said that, if we don't get to new normal, we're also preparing for what is known as *blended learning*. *Blended learning* is not just online because we recognize that although—we're one of those in the 17th Congress that pushed for libreng wi-fi, the reality is there are still far-flung areas without Wi-Fi 'no.

So in addition to online learning, we will be tapping community radio stations, community TV stations, PTV 4 and even private companies such as ABS-CBN for instructional purposes.

So, this is a bold move on the part of the Department of Education, we have not done it on this scale but we have to adopt with the times in the same that media has adopted to the times that we're now both broadcasting from our homes.

So, the *[signal fade]*

DAVILA: Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: —the clarification. Formal learning will *[signal fade]*—Yes? Yes?

DAVILA: Okay—

SEC. ROQUE: Let me repeat what I've said—

DAVILA: Not all of it but you—

SEC. ROQUE: Formal learning will definitely resume August 24 but face [*signal fade*]

DAVILA: Okay... Secretary, I think your wi-fi is hanging, speaking of Wi-Fi...

Okay... Sec.?

All right. Okay. Secretary, let's start again. Can we try and have him back on the air even by phone because there are a few more questions we'd like to ask.

Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: [*signal fade*]

DAVILA: Secretary, we can try and reach you by phone, if you can answer your phone— Are you there?

SEC. ROQUE: [*signal fade*] May not push through [*signal fade*]

DAVILA: Okay. Let's contact Secretary Harry Roque again even by phone. I'm saying this to our team, our ANC—Okay, he's on the line! Fabulous!

Okay, Secretary Roque there you are! Can you hear me?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, yes, I can hear you and I hope I was clear that what the President—

DAVILA: Yeah, can you repeat it? So, you said blended learning—

SEC. ROQUE: I will repeat it.

DAVILA: Go ahead.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, yes... Okay. What is certain is by August 24, formal learning will resume. What is uncertain is whether or not face-to-face classes will resume, that would really depend on whether we have achieved the new normal; but DepEd now is preparing for *blended learning*. Enrolment will proceed because whether it be face-to-face or blended, you have to enroll your children because there has to be a basis for assessing whether or not after one year your children will progress to the next level.

So, I'll repeat: formal learning will resume possibly not face-to-face but definitely blended.

DAVILA: Oo. Okay, malinaw iyon. Kailangan i-enroll mo ang anak mo kasi August 24 magsisimula na. Secretary, I'm curious, would the government allow private schools, for example, there are schools with a very small class size of fifteen in class, would you allow those kinds of schools to start again with face-to-face learning even twice a week; have some kind of... I don't know, creative way to do it; a balance of both?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, from what I understand, *blended learning* does not completely preclude face-to-face. In fact, they may have to be... you know, small meetings just for assessment purposes or for enforcement purposes.

So, what I'm saying is—that's why it's called *blended* ano. We can be creative about it and I think there are alternative learning specialists. Now, if you're asking about special schools, I think it's a matter of getting accreditation from DepEd. If it's special learning which really has about only about fifteen students, I see

no reason or obstacle for the DepEd not to allow it. But if they will have to be an accreditation process to be arrived at by the DepEd.

DAVILA: Okay. A question from the Malacañang Press Corps, this is from Rose—

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, Rose.

DAVILA: Paki tanong po kay Spox anong ginagawa ng gobyerno para matuldukan ang operasyon ng underground clinics ng mga Chinese sa bansa? I think she's referring to iyong nahuli sa Fontana sa Clark. Batay sa report, pinakawalan ang dalawang Chinese na nahuling nagpapatakbo daw, Secretary, ng underground hospital. Okay?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, bukod po doon sa pagpapatupad ng batas, isa pa po na ipinag-utos na ng Presidente eh iyong mabilisang registration ng mga traditional medicine. Alam ninyo, bagama't ito ay paglabag sa batas natin at talagang hinuhuli iyan at ipinapasara, huwag nating kalimutan na baka naman dahil baka may ginagamot silang mga Tsino eh mayroon silang mga gumaganang mga produkto.

Kaya nga po ang FDA eh dati pa po, bago pa magkaroon ng mga raid sa mga illegal clinics na ito ay inutusan na po ng Presidente na pabilisin iyong proseso ng registration lalo na po ng traditional medicine. Iba po kasi ang proseso kapag western medicine at saka traditional medicine, mas expedited po iyong traditional medicine.

At kaya naman po ipinag-utos iyan ng Presidente kasi siyempre mas maraming karanasan sila dito sa sakit na ito at mas marami silang ginamit na traditional medicine, nais din nating malaman kung talagang gumagana itong mga traditional medicine na ito nang magamit din natin; pero kinakailangan rehistrado pa rin po sa FDA.

DAVILA: Okay. So, it is illegal for Chinese workers in the country to have these underground hospitals if it is approved or licensed, they cannot do it on their own?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. There is a law that medicine cannot be practiced without being admitted or being allowed to do so by the Professional Regulatory Commission and that medicines would not be marketed without registration with the FDA and that's why—

DAVILA: And I think it's against the law for a—Tama ba ito, Secretary, it's against the law for foreigners even to practice medicine in the Philippines? 'Cause I have a doctor/friend who is—

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, it still is because the practice o profession is still reserved exclusively for Filipinos although the WTO [WHO] wishes to open that but hindi pa nangyayari nga ano.

Pero ang importante nga po dito, as far as the President is concerned, eh tingnan natin kung gumagana itong mga traditional medicine na ito. Kung gumagana, irehistro natin at subukan din natin na ipanggamot sa mga pasyente; pero hindi po pupuwede nang wala naman tayong kahit anong pagsusuri kung gumagana nga o hindi.

DAVILA: Okay, My last question before we go is the *Balik-Probinsiya Program*. Clearly, many more Filipinos, OFWs, stranded individuals are going to back to the provinces to sit out the quarantine there.

And Mayor Richard Gomez, I interviewed him yesterday, said that the guidelines weren't clear, you know, he just got a text that how many are coming and he's not sure if they're tested.

Secretary, are there guidelines that before Filipinos can go back, iyong mga kababayan natin, to their hometown, to their provinces, they have been tested from the place they've been from?

SEC. ROQUE: We would distinguish 'no between the repatriation of OFWs and the *Balik-Probinsiya* proper itself 'no. Now, what Mayor Gomez I think was complaining about was the onslaught 'no—the influx, arrivals from—into Leyte by OFWs.

We had about 24,000 OFWs who were “stranded” because they were subjected to PCR testing and there were delays in the release of the result that’s why we have to house them in hotels. Now, remember that for one week we even had to close the airport because we have ran out of hotel capacity to house these workers awaiting their PCR results.

That’s when last Monday, the President ordered by hook or by crook bring them home. But the President’s order was of course bring them home and make sure they have their PCR results.

So, I’d like to assure Mayor Gomez and similarly situated mayors that as far as these OFWs are concerned, who were stranded in Manila, they were brought home literally by the government, we paid for their transportation, after they procured their COVID testing results which were all negative. Of course, those who tested positive were not allowed to go home, they were brought to the We Heal As One Centers. So, that is one clarification I’d like to make.

Secondly, DILG Secretary Año have said that although it is the prerogative of the LGUs to still quarantine them if they want to, although they have already PCR results saying they’re negative, they could do so but the appeal is—if each barangay is required to have an isolation area, if they could be isolated in those barangay quarantine areas already so that they can already be near their families.

Now, as far as coordination is concerned, I think the text message was sufficient because it was simply to inform them that we’re bringing home OFWs who have already tested negative by PCR test and therefore they should already be allowed to return to their families.

DAVILA: All right. On that note—

SEC. ROQUE: Now as far as the *Balik-Probinsiya* is concerned, that’s a different program but it is also required that before they are officially assisted to return to their provinces that they be given COVID testing and if the LGU would want, they could also subject them to quarantine for their testing.

Now, I think there’s less of a problem in the *Balik-Probinsiya Program* because right now we’re implementing it on a pilot basis and with the expressed consent of the LGUs.

DAVILA: On that note, Secretary Harry Roque, I want to thank you so much for your time this morning, I really appreciate it. And I think the big story today that we have to look out for with the IATF is if Metro Manila will be on GCQ come June 01. So, we’ll wait for that.

SEC. ROQUE: That’s true.

DAVILA: Yeah...

SEC. ROQUE: That’s true. Okay! Thank you very much, Karen and I’d like to thank you also for the opportunity to disseminate this information to our people.

Thank you very much and good morning!

DAVILA: All right. Stay safe sir and stay strong. God bless you.

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