

**PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE**  
**News and Information Bureau**

**INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE**  
**BY KAREN DAVILA/ANC**  
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**DAVILA:** What revisions are we looking at June 16? Just give me an overview right now.

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**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, we now have quite a number of provinces under MGCQ and GCQ 'no. So when we talk about revisions, we will see if we can have a lower classification – new normal for those under MGCQ, or MCGQ for those that are still ni GCQ.

**DAVILA:** So, let's talk about NCR first, Secretary Roque. NCR which of course includes bustling Metro Manila. What are we looking at for NCR?

**SEC. ROQUE:** We are looking at the epicenter of the virus; it has always been the epicenter. Although indicators appear to be improving, the reality is, numbers remain high and are increasing in Metro Manila. So, I would say that Metro Manila will take a lot of the time of the IATF as we meet this afternoon to determine if it can graduate to MGCQ from GCQ.

Another city that has the same trend is Cebu City. Cebu City right now, like Metro Manila, is in GCQ but the numbers are also increasing. So, I would say that these two areas, Metro Manila and Cebu City, would take quite sometime in the discussion that will take place this afternoon.

**DAVILA:** That is quite interesting, Secretary. In that report we saw, right before you came on, the analysis in terms of numbers is 17,000 of the COVID positive patients are actually mild. Will that be a factor in Metro Manila and Cebu City moving on to MGCQ? In other words, yes you are COVID positive, but you are mild. Will that help?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's a factor of course because we are always looking out the doubling time of the disease together with critical care capacity. So, meaning, even if the number maybe going up, if we have the capacity to take care of them in case they get sick really in a critical manner, then it could still be decided that we could graduate to a lower degree of classification.

**DAVILA:** What does Metro Manila need to have in terms of determining factors for it, Secretary, to move to MGCQ? I mean, it is a given that 12,000 of the cases are in Metro Manila, but what would the IATF want to see for Metro Manila to move to MGCQ? We do need it for business, to start moving again, more people going to work. What is IATF looking for?

**SEC. ROQUE:** We are still looking for some kind of data that would indicate that Metro Manila, if we give it more liberty so to speak under MGCQ 'no, will not spark a second wave. We cannot afford a second wave and that is why we are looking at *[unclear]* data 'no, but an indication that if we completely loosen up or almost completely loosen up, because there is no such thing as completely loosen up now, is that the cases will not spike.

That is why Metro Manilans will really have to go out of their way to observe social distancing, wearing of mask and keeping healthy.

**DAVILA:** Secretary, do you remember, I think at least two months ago, there were talks—a few weeks ago, there were talks wherein the business sector wanted that if a certain barangay for example had a growing number of COVID positive, we would practice what they called just a barangay lockdown. So recently 78 residents in two streets in Barangay San Dionisio, Parañaque tested positive for COVID. What is the practice for something like that?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Right now, the IATF has issued a resolution authorizing city mayors to lockdown in effect not just barangays but zones of barangays, even subdivisions and building. So, that is part of the strategy because we want to give as much freedom to the different places of Metro Manila to resume economic activity.

So, we are still looking at that 'no. All I am saying is, we have to be very careful as far as Metro Manila and Cebu City are concerned. But that is already being implemented. We hear of mayors already locking down specific barangays and we just need to determine if that is sufficient or if we need to retain Metro Manila under GCQ.

**DAVILA:** And is it right, Secretary, that the main difference with MGCQ is essentially dining in terms of business?

**SEC. ROQUE:** And transportation. Because right now transportation is only between 10 to 50%; in MGCQ, it will be 50 to 100, and dine in of course is 50%.

And then, of course, MGCQ is a world of a difference because even mass gatherings will now be allowed up to 50% of the capacity of the venue. So, that means that other industries that are not allowed to operate under GCQ may now be allowed under MGCQ. That is why we need to be very, very careful.

**DAVILA:** And for the record, GCQ, it's allowed to have small gatherings of ten people?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes. Whereas, in GCQ, it's 50% capacity.

**DAVILA:** So, what else will be tackled in the meeting later with the IATF other than, one, possible relaxation? What else, Secretary?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I know that Cebu apparently has submitted an appeal, but that could be moot and academic. If IATF later on decides that Cebu province will become MGCQ, then their earlier appeal that they should be classified as MGCQ from GCQ would be moot and academic. But I think, it still has to be brought up because Cebu province gave me proof that they actually appealed within the period 'no.

But the most important, of course, is what will happen in June 16? And again, I think the entire nation is eagerly awaiting for the decision of the IATF.

Now, I would like to stress that actually when we decide whether or not to ease up further or retain the classification, it's always scientific data. So, we are all eager to await the epidemiological report coming from the DOH.

**DAVILA:** Now, Senator Riza Hontiveros is calling for an audit on the 325 billion pesos that's been set aside to fight COVID. Can you give me an overview, more or less, of where it went? I do know that P205 billion, the last time I interviewed you, you said that P100 billion is still up for release, that's the Social Amelioration Program, the cash fund, which will be distributed electronically.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, so it's very easy to account for it because a big bulk of it is intended for ayuda, social amelioration. The rest were spent to buy PPEs, medical equipment and even benefits to frontliners. So, we are really going to account for about P100 billion, more or less. And given the number of PPEs and other equipment that we have bought, it's very easy to account.

**DAVILA:** Okay, in terms of the P100 billion for cash aid, you said in the presscon that it will take two days to actually distribute it?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That is according to Secretary Bautista, whom I was with yesterday in Clark when we sent home around 600 OFWs. He said that they will be ready by next week. The primary mode of distribution will be electronic this time. And since it's electronic, to those who would be covered, they can distribute in two days' time, the balance. Those who have no access to electronic payments will still be done manually, but this time, it will be disbursed with the assistance of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

**DAVILA:** And when is the target date for the electronic distribution, Secretary?

**SEC. ROQUE:** According to Secretary Bautista, it's next week.

**DAVILA:** So, by next week. Ideally by next week, that whole P105 billion should already have been disbursed and distributed?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Realistically, we are hoping that at least a majority of the P105 billion would already have been disbursed electronically because included also in their data is about 1.5, more or less 'no, beneficiaries under the 4Ps 'no.

So, you would have a minimum 1.5 and then those that qualified electronically. So, we are hoping that at least 60% would be done by next week.

**DAVILA:** Okay, you also said—well, the last time the President spoke, he did order that Secretary Duque can put up a small team just to handle the distribution of the P1 million checks that should have been given to the families of the 26 health workers who succumbed to COVID; and you did announce that they already received it. It turns out, it seems that, it actually could have been done much faster. So, how did you do it?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, it is not a matter of actually doing it 'no. I think the President just had to show his impatience for bureaucrats to move 'no. But it's been achieved. Although, Karen, one thing I need to clarify is the P100,000 which should be given to those who became severely ill with COVID, and right now, they have identified under 20 persons to have received the P100,000 benefit. So, I'd like to verify how many actually should be entitled because it's maybe a bit difficult to believe that only about 20 frontliners became critically ill with COVID-19. So, we will have to check on that figure.

**DAVILA:** Okay, I'm curious. I mean, is Secretary Duque going to—I mean, fire some people frankly for the ineptitude given that when the President said, 'Do formatting, pay them' and then you come out, Secretary, and said, "Okay, they received it." So, people are in shock thinking, "Puwede pala eh," right. So, who's accountable for that, the full delay in implementing law?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't know what's going to happen now 'no because it's not a secret that the President was enraged. In fact, when he found out 'no that here we are always saying we value our frontliners but we can't seem to walk the talk because the benefits already provided by law, were not given to them in time.

And what really pissed the President was in the case of soldiers who are killed in action, within the week, it's handed to the beneficiaries; while they are still in mourning and while they are still viewing, the benefits already given to the family.

He could not understand why, you know, the health workers had to wait this long 'no. So, having said that, the President did say that heads should roll, and I am wondering now what actually will happen. It's something that I need to talk to him about, about his early instruction that heads should roll because this was unacceptable.

**DAVILA:** All right, in terms of OFWs. Secretary Roque, we are expecting 42,000 OFWs to arrive this June. That's an addition to the 30,000 that already arrived. And we saw photos all over social media, the press took photos of our OFWs lying down on the sidewalk. What measures is the government taking, the IATF, in terms of the process for OFWs upon arrival? What kind of assistance? In your last meeting, Secretary Galvez said it should be a one stop shop, but those photos don't show that.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, plenty of remedial measures taken already. To begin with, we have made a promise that OFWs should not stay in the quarantine facilities awaiting the results for more than five days. How are we going to achieve this? Number one, we have opened the other gateways to the country. Yesterday, we were in Clark precisely because the OFWs are going to depart from Clark going to Cebu.

Number two, we have actually said that the employment agencies, particularly for the seamen can choose the lab that they want to process the PCR test, because that is where we had the backlog. In other words, we have implemented a pre-market even in PCR testing. No more playing favorites, whoever can do it efficiently and at the cheapest price, we have given the OFWs and their principals liberty to choose.

Number three, even the process is not different 'no. If they have identified a lab already to do the PCR test, then they can go straight to the hotel, and the lab technicians can either go to the hotel or they can be even be allowed to go to the lab outside of the hotel but there will have to be some security measures taken—

**DAVILA:** I don't mean to interrupt, Secretary. When an OFW arrives, so let say here you are, you get cleared from the airport, the swab testing is not in the airport?

**SEC. ROQUE:** No.

**DAVILA:** It is not. But do you go straight to your hotel, which is a quarantine facility, and then you are tested before entering the hotel. Where are you tested if you are an OFW?

**SEC. ROQUE:** It depends on whether or not your principal has made prior arrangements. Now, the prior arrangements will be applicable to the seamen and about 50% of those returning are actually seamen, if not more. So, I know for example that one of the leading manning agencies has contracted with the private laboratory and in this case, they will be tested already in the hotel because there were prior arrangements made by the manning agencies 'no.

Now, for everyone else who do not have prior arrangements, then they would still have to be swabbed in the airport. But the returning Filipinos on the other hand—because remember, we are not just talking of OFWs; we are talking about students and people who are just returning home after airports re-open, where they work, then they can even choose which lab they want to go to 'no. So, they will sign an undertaking for OFWs and if they don't want to be swabbed in the airport, then they can choose the laboratory. They can check in the hotel and then make arrangement, so that they can go to the laboratory.

This is actually to ease the backlog. And the reason is we are expecting as much as 300,000 OFWs to come home in the next three months.

**DAVILA:** Oo. Pero kapag ganoon, where is the one stop shop that Secretary Galvez told the President? I mean, I have yet to hear it, Sec., with how you described the process, it doesn't sound like a one stop shop just yet.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, let's just say that we had a backlog because we only limited ourselves to one or two laboratories 'no and they couldn't cope 'no. So, now I was—in fact, last night only – I don't have the exact figures – but right now, not a single laboratory can claim a majority of testing done on the returning Filipinos, whether be it returning Filipinos or OFWs. The most, it's now 25% from one laboratory 'no; and of course we had quadrupled the number of laboratories. That is why we want ... we are hoping and confident that the time that OFWs needs to spend in the different quarantine areas will be a lot less now.

Yesterday, in fact, in Clark, because we implemented the strategy of among others, swabbing them and utilizing labs outside of Metro Manila, they were able to leave the quarantine facility within 72 hours. And we want to do this for every OFW.

**DAVILA:** And so far, the last count I had is we have 42 labs that is what, well, Vince Dizon told us. Of course, Vietnam has 112. Where are we now in terms, Secretary, of number of labs?

**SEC. ROQUE:** We are still aggressively pursuing the establishment of more laboratories because we don't have enough. You know, Karen, it's just the lab capacity, it's the actual testing that are being done. So, we need to improve not just the capacity but also to make sure that they all have supplies so that they can maximize their capacities.

**DAVILA:** Okay. Now the Anti-Terror Bill, you did confirm that Malacañang's already received it. I'm curious, has the President read it or seen it?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, it was received in Malacañang. The President is still in Davao but I'm sure the Legal Department of the Office of the Executive Secretary is already at it and scrutinizing the provisions of the bill.

**DAVILA:** Okay. What's interesting is the President certified this as urgent and then in your press conference, you did say that the President doesn't have to, sort of, rush to sign it. What made the President, I mean, take extra caution before signing it? What was it? Is it the concerns brought about by lawyers? Is it the constitutional infirmities pointed out? What made him take a step back?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, it's just a matter of course, Karen 'no, let me emphasize here that the bill was not rushed solely because of the certification. This bill was pending since January of 2018; it's been approved 4 months ago in the Senate and of course it was already discussed, finished at the committee level at the House of Representatives; but the approval on second and third reading in the House came after the certification, and the certification was only lately 'no, 2 weeks ago.

In fact, when I was asked about it in my press conferences at 12 noon, I was sure it was not yet certified urgent and later in the afternoon, that was when it was certified urgent 'no, so it's very soon, although—

**DAVILA:** Do you know, Secretary, why he even certified it as urgent? I mean, that's what critics have also asked, the timing of it, certifying at it as urgent when all energy should be focused on fighting COVID? What made the President certify it as urgent during this time?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Because in the time of COVID, the terrorists did not stop their nefarious activities. Remember that on 27<sup>th</sup> of May, 6,000 residents had to flee their homes in Maguindanao because of terrorist acts. In Patikul, Sulu in June 'no, there were also attacks leading to 4 deaths and 16 wounded. And prior to that, there were instances when soldiers who were securing DSWD officials distributing the 'ayudas' were attacked 'no.

So very clear that terrorists did not really ceased their activities despite of COVID-19 situation and that is why it was certified urgent late in the day because after the Senate had already passed it. It was clearly intended to make sure that it will pass the House, because in the last 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, the same thing happened, it was passed in the Senate but it was not passed in the House.

So, I guess the certification ensure that it will pass in the House. But you and I know that with or without certification, I think any legislative initiative supported by the administration would find better chances of being passed in the House than in the Senate. So in this instance, the certification was stamped because of the Senate 'no, it was to prod the House to do it. And the reason is clear 'no, they did not stop and they're taking advantage of COVID-19 to instill further fear amongst the people.

**DAVILA:** Okay. Now the DOJ has said that it will be studying the bill to also check if it can withstand the constitutionality issues that's being brought about the bill. I wanna understand essentially just how important the DOJ's recommendations will be to the President for him to either sign it or frankly veto it?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think it's very, very influential because the DOJ is still the legal adviser of the President 'no even if he has his own legal office within Malacañang itself 'no. So—and Karen let me stress this 'no, there has not been a budget bill signed into law without a specific veto coming from the President. So as a matter of course, the President will not automatically sign a law, it is scrutinized 'no. Although the difference is, you can't have a line item veto in terms of a normal legislation whereas you can do it in a budget bill 'no. But that's how the process works in Malacañang.

**DAVILA:** Oo. Now given the controversy of the Anti-Terror Bill, is this the one thing you can say that the President won't just allow this to lapse into law? In other words, he's gonna take a stand on this, either he signs it or he vetoes it? Or is it possible for him to make it just lapse into law and let critics take it to the Supreme Court after?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, let me manage expectations 'no, the President did certify it as urgent, so he agrees with the principal author of the bill, Senator Ping Lacson, that there is a need for the law. But let's just say that the public interest on the bill will make the President review the provisions of bill even more closer.

You know, Ping Lacson is serving on his third term as a senator, people trust him and I think I saw him in your program, he addressed every single provision that people had doubts with and I thought he gave reasonable explanations for everything.

**DAVILA:** Okay. Before we go, a congressman I interviewed on the show said that you were once against the Human Security Act of 2007 and yet of course, I mean being the President's Spokesperson, I've asked you in our interview, you're a human rights advocate and you defended the bill on Headstart and even when you speak to the press. This is more of a personal question for you frankly: How do you actually, you know, how do you coincide with that, that you were once against the Human Security Act and this is a far stricter bill with bigger questions on violating frankly the bill of rights and parts of the Constitution?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, two things 'no: I was part of a study, a worldwide study by Cambridge where we compared different national laws on terrorism and really, the Philippine law failed in comparison 'no. And secondly, we actually went to court and attempted to question the constitutionality of HSA and failed. So when the court had said that it is constitutional, I mean, why would you continue questioning its constitutionality?

It's like libel, I've always maintained that libel is contrary to [unclear] and unconstitutional, but since the Supreme Court has already ruled on the issue, why will I cry unconstitutionality again 'no? Perhaps in my individual capacity, I will wait for the proper case again to allow the court to re-examine –stare decisis 'no, or jurisprudence.

But for now, when you have already filed your case and argued your case and the court said it is constitutional, then you have to accept it.

**DAVILA:** On that note, anything you want to add, Secretary Roque, before we go this morning?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, my usual plea to the people, whatever will happen to Metro Manila and other parts of the Philippines will greatly be determined by our actions. Let's observe social distancing, good hygiene. Stay healthy because after all, we are opening up our economy for our economic survival but we don't want people to die because of the disease. Stay safe.

**DAVILA:** On that note, stay safe too, Secretary Roque. And I want to thank you so much for coming to Headstart this morning as always. Thank you, sir. God Bless you.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Always a pleasure. God bless.

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