

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY PINKY WEBB – THE SOURCE/CNN PHILIPPINES
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WEBB: Secretary Roque, good to have you again. Maraming salamat po sa oras.

SEC. ROQUE: Good morning, Pinky. And good morning, Philippines.

WEBB: So 70,764, sir, almost 2,000 new cases recorded yesterday. UP has predicted that this will reach by about 85,000 by the end of July 31. Sir, is this something that we should be alarmed? Because if we continue this trend, sir, 1,500, 1,800 definitely po aabot tayo dito sa 85,000 by end of July.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I wouldn't pretty say it's something alarming, but it should concern all of us 'no. I had a discussion with the UP people behind the forecast and the first thing I ask them was, am I correct in exhorting people to take steps so that we will not realize your forecast and they said 'certainly'. Because not meeting the forecast means less people getting sick with COVID-19. So, I can only exhort people in fact, to take steps to minimize the spread of the disease. But on a macro level, we look at the death rates which is still very low.

Yesterday, if I am not mistaken, it was under five. We looked at the positivity rate, it is still within the accepted standard imposed by the WHO. We have risen to eight, but the threshold is at ten and the 'R naught' (R_0) is 1.2 – 1.3. Although the ideal should be at 1, so that we could limit really the spread of the disease.

But I think the good news is yesterday in my press briefing, I noted that our critical care capacity is back again at 50% as of the latest data of the Department of Health 'no, which means that we are able to provide for critical care to those who will need it.

Now, the numbers, I think will continue to rise, for as long as we don't have vaccine and we don't have an antidote to it. I would like to see the numbers decrease, and I think it can be done. Especially now with the DOH pronouncement that those who are asymptomatic and with mild cases should nonetheless proceed to isolation centers if they don't have separate bedrooms and separate bathrooms. I think that is one of the key things that we should be doing now. Because in the past, we were told that if you are asymptomatic, you can stay at home without the qualification that you needed your own bathroom and your own bedroom. But now that that's clear, I think and with the quality of isolation centers that we have, I think we can reign-in the numbers further or even if we have reached 70,000 already.

Now, there is also a proposal now, coming from various sectors and I think it will be implemented. We are continuing with localized lockdowns and we will accompany the

localized lockdowns with massive, intense targeted testing using both PCR - both testing and antibodies. Because you can actually have a protocol combining both of these 'no. So, we should have more intensified testing, although we have reached the one million level, and we are going on our second million testing 'no. And if this is done, I think we could still reign-in the number and this is the observation made by the WHO no matter how dire, we could still reign-in this.

WEBB: I understand we've talk to this over and over again, Secretary Roque, about case doubling rate, mortality rate and R naught (R_0) sir. However, when you look at numbers, such as 2,000, 1,800 or 1,500 averaging possibly in the past week or so sir, it makes some people wonder if we are actually really, is the strategy really working. Because understandably, sir, there is more testing now. That's definitely what's been said by government, mas marami na po talagang tine-test ngayon, pero iyong numero po patuloy na tumataas.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, you know, Pinky as we improved our testing capacity. We are bound to get more numbers. And what's important really is that we are able to isolate and trace the people that they came in contact with to contain the spread of the contagion 'no. So, I think the numbers per se will increase with increased testing, that's a foregone conclusion. And that is why our positivity rate which is the number of persons per 100 persons tested, testing positive have also risen, because we have intensified.

Now, we have 25,000 to 27,000 tests daily compared that with, you know, few hundreds in the beginning in January. I'm only talking really of about 4 to 5 months. So, I think the situation is for the better now that we have more intense testing and now that the President has also appointed and designated focal persons for the isolation, for the tracing and the treatment.

WEBB: The four Czars.

SEC. ROQUE: I am confident that we will prevail.

WEBB: So, you think the strategy is still working?

SEC. ROQUE: The strategy is working, because people are still – an overwhelming number of people have been spared from the disease. I keep on reminding people that unless we actually took the steps that we did, we could have had up to 3.5 million cases already by now. And there is even a more dire prediction/forecast made by the Philippine Center for Development Studies that it could be as high as 20 million.

So, I am actually asking people to compare the numbers now with the projected numbers if we did not take decisive steps that we did. Now, I know that there are some virtues in comparing our performance with other countries, but remember that each country is peculiar. Talagang, marami talagang lugar sa Pilipinas na masisikip, napakahirap talagang magkaroon ng isolation diyan kapag mayroong isang nagkasakit, kaya nga, I think this Oplan Kalinga, will be a game changer too, because now, the symptomatic and the mild ones, don't have to be spreaders, they can be isolated now.

WEBB: Okay, so talking about that, Secretary, we have four Czars, we have Oplan Kalinga. Secretary Galvez also wants four designated hospitals in NCR. I guess the question is, couldn't this strategy or these plans of government been done earlier on?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, as far as designating COVID hospitals are concerned, we have designated COVID hospitals. He just wants to expand them. Because our experience, not long ago, was that our critical care capacity reached dangerous levels, no. By having more COVID dedicated hospitals, number one, we unburden regular hospitals of having to treat COVID patients, so that they can concentrate on other cases that they have to attend to.

But this has always been part of the strategy. PGH has been long designated as COVID hospital together with NKTi and now, with Quirino Medical Center as well. But what he just wants is for more bed capacity for COVID, because the private hospitals are particularly complaining that they can't allot more beds to COVID patients because of various reasons. So, to fill the lacuna, the fact that the private hospitals still not able to allocate up to 30% of the bed capacity and have said that they will to commit to allocate 20%, we need to have more COVID hospitals, just to avoid the impression that we don't have enough hospital bed when in fact, we do.

WEBB: Yeah, there are enough beds, sir. The problem with the hospitals, the PHAPI was saying that may kama, ang problema walang sapat na health workers, that's the other part of the problem, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we have remedied that. Because the DOH is now hiring nurses, even if they are going to work for private hospitals 'no. They first did in Cebu and we are doing that as well in Metro Manila now. And the package that we are giving them is a package competitive with the public hospitals, because there are three rounds of salary standardization, the salaries now of public nurses tend to be at par or even more that private nurses. But the nurses that we are hiring now to work for private hospital have exact same compensation as public nurses.

WEBB: Senate Minority Leader Franklin Drilon in a statement released yesterday or this morning said sir, that the Inter-Agency Task Force has actually failed. He went on to say that what did Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam do that we failed to do?

SEC. ROQUE: I don't think we failed. For as long as we did not meet the 3.5 projection of UP – and UP has been very good at their forecast 'no – I think we would have succeeded. We will always have different points of view, particularly those coming from the opposition, and I think they're resorting to politicking stories.

The appeal of the President is to concentrate on the COVID-19, set aside politicking for the time being which I think is a very wise policy.

WEBB: Would you consider that politicking, sir, or just really his assessment of the situation as probably shared by other people as well, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, again, I have to emphasize what could have been, and I have to emphasize the fact that mortality rate is low, critical care capacity is still good and the fact that most of cases are asymptomatic and mild.

So when you say that we have failed, it's the fact that we have not reined the dead and people are dying en masse. And I think right now, hospitals have gained competence in dealing with COVID patients, and this is the reason why we have minimized death rates. And for as long as we're minimizing death rates, I think we have succeeded. And there's no way I can change that position because one life loss nga is too much. But when you consider that in the past few days, we only had two to three people die even if there are thousands of cases, I think that's still a success.

WEBB: When do you think, Secretary Roque, when are we going to be comfortable ... kailan ho kaya tayo dadating doon sa punto na iyon pong nakikita nating positive cases are going to start to see just a bend or a slowdown in the numbers, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I think it will come when we actually implement this more intense testing and isolation 'no, and we will see it over a period of one month and not just one week 'no.

The proposal now – and I'm sure it will be acted upon – is to accompany, as I said, localized testing with intensified testing using not just ordinary PCR but pooled testing. Because in pooled testing, you can get the swabs of about ten people, put it in the reagent; and if they test positive, then to take test individually – each of the ten persons 'no – for PCR, subject them to PCR test 'no. That way, we can multiply the available test kits that we have 'no. Instead of testing just ten, you can test 100 'no. And in this manner, we would get the positives, more positives and isolate them and treat them, and meanwhile contain the spread of the disease as I said 'no.

And I think this will work, I'm confident it will work, but we just have to build the capacity of our testing centers first. Now that we have them, I think we can unleash the full capacity and concentrate in isolating the positives, to contain the further spread of COVID-19.

WEBB: All right. We'll be taking a very short break. We'll be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

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

Secretary, the last time we spoke and the President kept us at our status here in NCR, we talked about the possible two weeks, the next two weeks until July 31 that it will somehow be

a grace period to see where we're going. Do you think, sir, that kung umabot po tayo ng 85,000 by July 31, maghihigpit po ulit sa NCR?

SEC. ROQUE: That's a distinct possibility, although it's a possibility that I wish would not happen because we all know that while we have to contain the disease, we also need to re-start our livelihoods 'no. We've come to a very crucial point where I think the economy can no longer afford to be shutdown anew. But if we have to and there's no alternative, we need to do it.

But that's why I'm confident that the Filipinos actually will cooperate to even more greater degree than they have shown. Yesterday, I announced that we're second in the world as far as wearing of face masks is concerned, and this is according to the University of London. And that shows that the Filipinos will cooperate when they have to. And I think the message has been well received by the Filipinos that we need to really take care of our health so we can proceed and pursue a livelihood anew 'no.

So ang sinasabi nga natin, dapat ingatan ang ating mga katawan para tayo po ay magkaroon ng hanapbuhay. So, yes, a reversion to MECQ or a more stringent quarantine is possible. I hope it will not happen though.

WEBB: Yeah, I was listening to your press conference yesterday, sir. Sabi mo nga nine out of ten Filipinos actually wear facemasks, ano po. Then that debunks this theory or ito pong belief na pasaway po ang mga Pilipino?

SEC. ROQUE: I inherently believe they're not pasaway. Kaya nga lang, iyon nga 'no, looking back for instance this Oplan Kalinga, this should really have been launched earlier 'no; because the former policy was asymptomatics and mild cases can stay home probably because at that time we did not have enough isolation centers.

I'm personally convinced that one of the things that will change the situation now is if the asymptomatic and the mild ones voluntarily isolate themselves in government facilities or in local government facilities. There are two types, for the benefit of everyone, iyong [unclear] which is national government and the centers maintain by the local government units which I think is more convenient because you are going to be quarantined in your own community. But this could be a game changer, and I encourage all those concerned to proceed to the nearest isolating centers and I promise you that the facilities are like, really, staying in a hotel. It's like a two-week paid vacation 'no, inclusive of three meals a day and Wi-Fi.

WEBB: Yeah, you said that also yesterday. Sir, you know, Senator Leila De Lima was ... she gave a statement about Health Secretary Francisco Duque III. She says that the reason that he hasn't been fired is because the administration needs someone to keep as a scapegoat. And I quote, she says, "My guess is the President just needs a whipping boy for the tragedy that they themselves have brought to our nation." Just a reaction on that, sir, before I go to SONA.

SEC. ROQUE: I read the same papers and I watch the same news as Senator Leila De Lima, I can tell you, the President has not been treating Secretary Duque as a whipping boy. The question I'm asked more often is why not 'no. But it has never been the case that I think the President has ever used him as whipping boy, he's always been supportive of Secretary Duque. He says mistakes have been made, for as long as these mistakes were done in good faith, then it's no reason for him to lose confidence 'no. So let's leave it at that.

WEBB: All right. Very briefly, Sec., iyon pong SONA, this happens of course, the 5th State-of-the-Nation-Address on Monday, sir. What can we expect from the President's speech? Just an overview, sir.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, the President will personally appear before Congress. And I think you can imagine that the President will summarize the effects of the COVID pandemic, as well as the responses of government and the way forward 'no - how the government will actually approach this problem. I think there's no other problem as big as COVID right now, and you can imagine that the upcoming State-of-the-Nation-Address will discuss this pandemic in much detail.

But I think the difference will be, he will be presenting now a roadmap for recovery, which actually, if you've noticed the economic team has not unveiled yet. And I think the reason is they want to unveil it in the SONA itself and in many fora after the SONA.

WEBB: And we will watch out for that. Thank you to Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you very much, Pinky, always a pleasure. Good morning.

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