

**PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
NEWS AND INFORMATION BUREAU**

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE

SECRETARY MARTIN ANDANAR

BY KAREN DAVILA – HEADSTART/ANC

JULY 27, 2020 (8:03 A.M. – 8:36 A.M.)

SEC. ANDANAR: [RECORDING STARTS] First off, we want to inform everyone, Karen, that the President is ready for the 5th State of the Nation Address; he already had his second rehearsal last night. And as you have all probably heard, due to the infection of RTVM personnel, the RTVM will also be deploying a different team to cover the State of the Nation of Address, and it will be composed of staffers who had no contact at all with those infected with COVID-19.

For this year's SONA, it will not be the same in terms of attendance compared to the past years. It is the first time that in observing the prescribed health protocols and number of people who will be allowed inside Batasan will be very limited. And if the protocols and if the regulations of the House is followed, it will only be 50 all in all physically present to witness the 5th SONA of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte. These 50 will be composed of selected individuals from the Senate, the House and even the Executive Branch.

It is the first time also that a President of a country will be delivering the SONA in the midst of a pandemic largely through virtual.

DAVILA: Now, there's some confusion on social media this morning, I just opened Twitter, of course, traditionally, it's always been 4 in the afternoon. But there seems to be some confusion that it—some are saying it's a 2 in the afternoon. Can you just straighten this out this morning?

SEC. ANDANAR: It will still begin at 4 P.M. – the usual tradition of having the Speaker of House and the Senate President opening the floor for everybody. And there will also be the flag ceremony and the usual prayer, and then the President will just breeze through his speech. And afterwards, the President goes back to Malacañang; there will be no more interviews as far as I'm concerned or as far as we know because, again, media is not allowed inside the halls and this is to follow the strict protocols of the Department of Health.

DAVILA: Okay. I'm curious, Secretary, you said, the President finished his second rehearsal last night. Can you give us an idea of how long the speech is?

SEC. ANDANAR: Oh, boy! I wasn't there at the rehearsal, the first and the second one, because the seats were very, very limited, obviously, because of the health scare. But if the speech is read in the time—

DAVILA: Like strictly followed, yeah.

SEC. ANDANAR Yeah, in the time that we or my companions have measured, I think it will not go beyond an hour and 20.

DAVILA: Okay.

SEC. ANDANAR: But, again, it's the President's prerogative to do adlibs in between.

DAVILA: Okay. And what will the focus of the speech be? He is delivering the 5th SONA under very unique and historic times in the midst of a pandemic. And you have senators that are expecting him to draft a comprehensive plan in the fight against COVID. What can we expect, Secretary?

SEC. ANDANAR: The SONA will be one that is full of optimism and hope. As in the past SONAs, the President may discuss the achievement of the administration to date until the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The President will also talk about the effects of the pandemic on our economy. He will give a special mention, perhaps, to all of the frontliners who are leading our fight against the COVID-19. The President is also likely to discuss resolutions and bills pushed by the administration, such as the Malasakit Act and the Salary Standardization – it's possible. He will also tackle the various subsidy programs of frontline agencies and their beneficiaries; the enactment of the Bayanihan Law and the COVID-19 response programs can be discussed as well.

The President is also expected to talk about the government's good fiscal management despite the pandemic; along with... this he may outline the concrete plans to strengthen the government's response to the pandemic which will stir the economy towards socio-economic recovery. And traditionally, the President will discuss his legislative agenda during the SONA. So this year, I believe that the President will continue to pursue proposed measures to strengthen our healthcare system and to improve the delivery of the government's assistance to the vulnerable sectors.

DAVILA: Okay. All right, let's discuss of some of those aspects that you just mentioned. You consider that one of the government's major accomplishments is how it responded to COVID-19. Am I correct, Secretary?

SEC. ANDANAR: Yes.

DAVILA: Yes, and yet you have public experts who have given the government's response to COVID-19 an 'F.' They have said *palpak ito*, they have criticized the response of the government; they have called it "militaristic." They have, actually, even criticized it for lack of planning. And just yesterday, over the weekend, we witnessed how the government itself actually broke its own protocols of social distancing in Rizal Memorial Coliseum with its Handog Tulong Program na nagpapauwi ng mga locally stranded individuals. Gobyerno mismo

ang lumabag sa sariling patakaran nito na magkadikit-dikit ang libu-libong tao. So ito muna tayo, in terms of the ratings that the IATF is an 'F.'

SEC. ANDANAR: Well, people are entitled to their own opinion. We have programs that the government have implemented for the past few months to address the problem, the huge problem of the pandemic. It's not perfect, but the entire world is grappling with this problem.

But if we talk about the satisfaction of the general public on the President's effort to address the pandemic, based on the latest survey of the PSRC, it stood at 76%, so it is still high. But then again, we're not ... I'm not saying that this is what we're after, the high satisfaction ratings, because remember, the President is no longer running for president. He cannot run – it is barred by the Constitution. So what we really want to do is just to serve the public and give the best service that we can during this very, very critical stage in our history.

DAVILA: Yeah. But, Secretary, can you be specific on exactly... the specific accomplishments of the government against COVID in terms of how it addressed, I mean, this situation in the last four months?

SEC. ANDANAR: Okay. Again, the sentiments of the majority of the Filipinos feeling that the quality of their lives probably got worse is to be expected because of the effects of the pandemic and especially the loss or the suspension of sources of livelihood. And we have no gage at all if this pandemic will affect the President's satisfaction rating. No satisfaction survey outside the efforts to address the coronavirus has been done. And for the President, his position as the Chief Executive is not a popularity contest; as I mentioned, there is no second term for this. And what is important for the President is that he is able to continue serving all Filipinos.

Now, the President has signed laws that would improve the lives of the Filipinos, and among these laws would be the Masustansiyang Pagkain Para sa Batang Pilipino Act. There is also the Inter-agency Task Force on Zero Hunger. We also have the Universal Access to Tertiary Education Act, the Universal Healthcare Act, Malasakit Centers Act, and so on and so forth. These are accomplishments of the President throughout the four years.

DAVILA: Yeah. But these are acts wherein in the implementation is yet to be seen.

SEC. ANDANAR: Okay. But let me just answer the question about—

DAVILA: In terms of the last four months with how the government fought COVID?

SEC. ANDANAR: Yeah, exactly, Karen. Following the immediate and efficient response of the Duterte administration against COVID-10, majority of the Filipinos have expressed their satisfaction. As I mentioned earlier with our performance in handling the COVID-19 pandemic and based on the global crisis perception index and PSRC—

DAVILA: But can you be specific.

SEC. ANDANAR:—through the National Action Plan, the country has now procured a total of more than 1,300 beds, more than 14,000 isolation ward beds, more than 1,900 mechanical ventilators as of July of this for our COVID-19 hospital capacity. As of July also of this year, the Philippines is capable of conducting 24,000 tests in which there have already been more than a million total individual tested for COVID-19.

DAVILA: But then, Secretary, before you continue, do you consider this a success because the target of the government was 30,000 tests daily? And then the goal was 50,000 tests daily compared to our Asian neighbors, we aren't paring too well with 24,000 tests daily. In other words, 24,000 tests aren't, I mean, compared to where we were, it's much higher, but would you consider this an achievement?

SEC. ANDANAR: Well, it is an achievement and we are taking this at the time. We are waiting for the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act II to be enacted today. And the Bayanihan Act II will help the government achieved its goal of more tests on a daily basis.

DAVILA: All right. What else, Secretary—I'll go to the Bayanihan II later. What else in the last four months?

SEC. ANDANAR: Again, as part of the government T3 strategy, we have more than 8,000 or almost 9,000 temporary treatment and monitoring facilities to accommodate COVID-19 suspects, probable confirmed patients, etc. We also had the first tranche and the second tranche of the SAP. We have provided subsidies to more than 27 million beneficiaries in the Philippines; more than a hundred billion distributed. On the other hand, we have currently undertaking second tranche as I mentioned earlier. We have already provided subsidies to 3.5 million families of the 17 million target beneficiaries. To assist our medical frontliners, the Duterte administration has insured its promise of implementing the increase in salary grade to government nurses from Salary Grade 11 to SG 15, increasing their income by as much as 10,000 per month under the Salary Standardization Law to assist our COVID-19 ... I mean there are numerous accomplishments.

DAVILA: I don't mean to but you, but when you talk about the Social Amelioration Program of how many families the government has helped in the time of COVID, the SWS also came out with a hunger survey and over 5.2 million Filipino said that they went hungry in the time of COVID. So 3.9 million Filipino said, they experienced moderate hunger, 1.3 million families said they experienced severe hunger. When you looked at these numbers and you looked at the accomplishment, can you really say, Secretary, that the government has done enough in terms of – the money was there – but in terms of planning? I mean, you also hear critic say that it was really the private sector that moved early on when it came to COVID response. Did the government would do enough?

SEC. ANDANAR: It's all of nation approach. That's been the policy of this administration to include the private sector in the solution. The President has mentioned that, he thanked the private sector for lending a helping hand.

DAVILA: Yeah. But with this survey, with the SWS, has the government done enough?

SEC. ANDANAR: You know, the question if the government has done enough. Yes, the government has done enough within its means. Because you see, we do not have an infinite source of budget for the government. The budget is, the government is dependent on the taxes that are collected by the Bureau of Internal Revenue and other profit centers of the government to subsidize all the programs, especially the social programs of the government. And mind you, the Social Amelioration Program is so by far the biggest program that has given a very wide social net in terms of assistance to the public.

Again, our country is not a welfare country. But then again, we were able to do that – it's not enough, but it's expected. As you will look at the GDP rates of the country, the growth rate from the pandemic up to today when it started was 6.7% down to -0.2%. and it's understandable that people lose jobs, but the government is doing everything that every day, every family can eat three times a day, [indistinct].

DAVILA: Can we expect from the SONA the government's plan to revive the economy? No less than Senate President Tito Sotto said that he would want to hear the President's plan on how the government will revive the economy. I mean, we have seen technically, it's not yet a recession, but you already have fears of a recession. So, can we expect specific plans or new targets for the year?

SEC. ANDANAR: That is one of the topics that the people should expect how the President will plan to pump-prime the economy, as we see and observed from our neighbors. Singapore has contracted by 41% in the second quarter. So the economy is gone down. Our economy has gone down by -0.2% during the first quarter. We don't have the figures for the second quarter. We are all expecting a down trend in the economy. But we are also very optimistic that by the end of the year, we will be able to rise again as a great nation.

DAVILA: And how? What's the role of Bayanihan II in all these? So, what will Bayanihan II focus on? Is this an economic stimulus package or is this more than aid package?

SEC. ANDANAR: Well, the Bayanihan Act will continue to give the government enough leeway to, number one, to feed the people; number two, to be able to buy a more health related equipment so that we can test more of our population so that we can easily bounce back to where we were before the pandemic. It's not yet over. We do not have a vaccine in the next few months according to experts. We will have the vaccine by the middle of next year. So, we need this Bayanihan Act to enable to continue our fight against the pandemic.

DAVILA: But how much does the government really want Congress to pass? How much does the Executive need? Because the first figure was something like 1.3 trillion that is what we

needed and yet no less than the Finance Secretary said that it could only be ... we can only afford something like a 140 billion pesos in the economic stimulus package. So, do you have already an idea of where the government plans to spend this 140 billion?

SEC. ANDANAR: As you mentioned, the proposed law will earmark about 140 billion for the purchase of COVID-19 test kits, medical supplies, continuation of cash-for-work and other subsidy programs for displaced OFWs, for unemployed teachers and those also in the film, audio-visual and creative industries and capital infusion to government financial institutions for the extension of loans or credit guarantees for small-medium enterprises. The 'Plant, Plant, Plant' of the Department of Agriculture, subsidies to farmers and fisherfolks and support for the transportation sector for adoptive systems and we also have earmarked for the tourism industry, for state universities and colleges, TESDA for learning and upscaling among others. This bill is really final reading in the Senate.

DAVILA: Okay. All right. Now this bill, Bayanihan II, is certified as urgent. I'd like to read to you a statement coming from the Manila-based Ateneo Policy Center. They said that essentially, the pandemic exposed certain weaknesses in President Duterte's military-reliant leadership. At a time of a crisis, this government essentially trained its guns on ABS-CBN, shutting down the network and arming itself with a new Anti-Terrorism Law that can potentially be used against critics of the administration instead of uniting the country to focus on solving COVID-19.

SEC. ANDANAR: Well, I don't really want to get into the Anti-Terrorism Law because this has been discussed thoroughly and the issue of ABS-CBN. To me what is important now is to focus our eyes and ears and hearts on what the President will discuss later this afternoon during the State of the Nation Address. As I've mentioned before, the State of the Address of the President today is our appointment with destiny, [garbled] is an unsurpassed—it's a problem that's never been faced by the Philippines perhaps in the last 50 years so it's difficult.

These are trying times and the State of the Nation Address for the Philippines is a must-see, must-listen, must-hear SONA.

DAVILA: Yeah. In the midst of the pandemic, there's ABS-CBN shutdown, the passage of the Anti-Terror Law and not only that, constitutional reform is on the table.

Okay. Do you believe that the President will mention charter change in his speech later? Is that a possibility, Secretary? Is that important to the President that this Congress finally addresses changes in the Charter during the President's term?

SEC. ANDANAR: I believe that charter change is not a priority of this administration and this administration is focused on all its effort to fight COVID-19 and how to support the economy and help the economy and all the businessmen and all the industries get back on its feet and the people to—

DAVILA: But if it's not a priority Secretary, why is the DILG pushing it?

SEC. ANDANAR: I believe the DILG and some non-profit organizations are pushing for amendments so to say that it is charter change would be wrong because I believe the DILG as they discussed before is only focused on amending some of the lines of the Constitution.

DAVILA: Okay. Now let me read to you another survey just recently while the SWS, Secretary, has not released any presidential satisfaction survey during COVID-19, last May 4 to 10, they did conduct a mobile survey. They interviewed 4,000 working age Filipinos across the country and essentially the question was losers and gainers 'did the quality of life get better' and it was a record high and an all-time low, okay, across a 135 SWS surveys in 37 years. Net gainers 78 scored, it was the worst in history for them and then just... I think +18 scored the quality of life got better.

So technically, 83% of Filipinos in the midst of COVID said the quality of life, their quality of life got worst under this administration in the midst of COVID.

SEC. ANDANAR: Yes, it's good to focus on the line 'amidst the pandemic, amidst COVID' Karen. Now it's undeniable that we are in trying times, very, very difficult times right now and as I mentioned earlier, the GDP was great until the pandemic struck. We were 6.7, now we are -0.2; the GDP growth rate averaged from 2016 to the first quarter of 2019 was on average of 6.6%. The national government debt to GDP ratio was at 39.6%. Remember that in 2004, our national government debt to GDP ratio was 71.6%. We can also read figures of revenues as—

DAVILA: Yeah. So, you're not surprised? In other words, you're not surprised?

SEC. ANDANAR: Yes, because if we also look at the inflation rate from 2016 'til about March of this year, we were at an average of 3%. And because of the pandemic, all hell broke loose and it's a problem that the entire international community is experiencing.

So naturally, if you have a lockdown and there's no work, people are losing their jobs then the result of the survey would be quite accurate.

DAVILA: Okay. Now, do you think this will affect the President's popularity or satisfaction ratings? He still has 2 years into his term and some have said also his endorsement power coming into 2022.

SEC. ANDANAR: You know, I already mentioned earlier that the President cannot run a second term. This is far from his mind, being popular or not. To him it's not a popularity contest.

What is important for the President is for him to be able to give this nation the solutions that it needs to be able to bounce back after this pandemic. Economic measures have been

planned already, business measures, trading measures, everything to help this country get back to its past course before this COVID-19 struck.

So for the State of the Nation Address later on we must listen, we must listen carefully because the President will be giving us a roadmap and this roadmap will be the roadmap for the entire country. The government cannot solve this alone, it will need the help of the private industries and it will need the help of the entire population. We should move at one direction, there should be no politics now, it should all be for the nation.

DAVILA: All right. Well, on that note, Secretary Martin Andanar—I'm curious, will you be at the Batasan later this afternoon?

SEC. ANDANAR: No, I will not be there. I will be here managing from home. I have a few—a lot of things going on. We have the Zoom viewing room for the Cabinet members who will not be going to the Batasan. We also have a viewing room for our LGUs. I will be managing also the RTVM from here. I will make sure that broadcast is unhampered during the SONA and we will ensure that the entire population gets to watch the President from all screens.

DAVILA: And, of course, you've already ensured—you've also assured that it will be unedited?

SEC. ANDANAR: Yes, of course, it's live.

DAVILA: All right. On that note, Secretary Martin Andanar, I want to thank you for your time this morning and take care, sir.

SEC. ANDANAR: Thank you, Karen. Thanks for the opportunity and thank you to your peers down there in ABS-CBN.

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