

**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, welcome to the show and maraming salamat po sa inyong oras.

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

**WEBB:** Secretary, yesterday in your briefing, tinanong po kayo about the quarantine status and you said yesterday that magkakaroon po ng meeting kahapon with, I believed, the DOH officials and probably some other officials. What was discussed yesterday, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** As always, I can't announce it, because it will be the President that will announce it on Thursday, if I am not mistaken. And there's still appeals to be made by the Local Government Units. So the recommendations are all preliminary subject to finalization on Thursday. But let's just say that things will not be the same, there will be major changes in our response to the pandemic.

We now have that capability to conduct more actual testing. We will use our capacity to conduct more testing on a daily basis. We have hit more than 30,000 a day and we will continue to test many people on a daily basis. We will aim to test more and we will invigorate our tracing which is now headed by the Tracing Czar, Mayor Magalong. And on top of that, we will now be building more and more isolation facilities, knowing that the mild and the asymptomatic cannot stay home unless they have their own bathrooms and bedrooms. So, it's not so much to the classification that will matter, but the responses, the new invigorated responses that we will have in this COVID-19 pandemic.

**WEBB:** From what I am understanding, sir, from what you just said, it seems, I know you can't say much, sir. Of course, this will be up to the President, but it seems that, from my understanding, sir ha, walang masyadong magbabago sa quarantine status, ang magbabago po iyong approach in testing, tracing and treating. Would that be correct, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That will be correct. The people will now see the difference in the response that we will have, it is now thoroughly invigorated and part of it, is we build capacity and we now have the capacity to do what we wanted from the very beginning. So, the people will see that there will be expanded targeted testing, beyond numbers that they probably would not have imagined and they will now see that government will getting more and more isolation facilities, we hope to build around a thousand isolation facilities, if these are not enough, we will book dormitories, school dormitories, school still out, we will actually attempt to isolate everyone who will turn out positive, because the experience of the other countries is it's only in this manner that they were able to control the spread of the disease 'no. So, we have learned from our experience here in the Philippines and we have heeded also the advice of other countries, including places like Wuhan as far as isolation is concerned.

**WEBB:** So, with regards to the quarantine status, it seems like that it's gonna be the same, the approach on testing, tracing and treating will be invigorated, it will be strengthened, sir. When we talk about testing, first and foremost, what would you say, what can you tell us would probably

be, sir the average test conducted with this major change or with this invigorated, new invigorated approach to the testing, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Right now, we have reached 30,000 more or less a day. But we are going to get more – why? Because in principle, we have agreed already to use full PCR testing, this means that one testing kit can now be used to test 10 up to 20 individuals. And the procedure is, if all of them in the pool tested negative, then all of them are negative. But if the test turned out to be positive, then every single one of the persons in the pool will be tested until we discover who the positive individual is, we isolate him, we trace the persons with whom he has contacts and we will treat.

So, the pool testing will expand our test, actual testing to at least times 10. Because the minimum of the pool that they are considering right now is 10. But there is a possibility that it could even be as high as 20, because the prevalence state in the Philippines is not yet as high as the United States.

In the United States because the prevalence is very high, they can only pool-test up to five individuals. But, I think, pool testing up to ten individuals would be ideal for the Philippines, so that means, we multiply by 10 our actual testing done in a day. If it's 30,000 a day right now, there's a possibility that we could do hundreds of thousands today now, if you utilized pool testing and that's a difference in approach, that's a game changer. Because with having the capacity to test ten times more than the current capacity, we are able now to isolate ten times more individuals who tested positive for COVID-19.

**WEBB:** And to be very clear about this pool testing, sir, I know you know spoke to Secretary Vince Dizon about this, I believed when you went to one of the testing facilities last week, Sec Roque. This means that, if this was multiplied by ten - so, let's not put it at 300,000 - you said hundreds of thousands. Would that mean individual test, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, that can still be considered individual test, because everyone would be getting a swab and their swabs will be exposed in the same re-agent to find out if anyone in the pool is positive. And as I said, when it's positive, then we will find out who in the pool is positive. But if everyone is negative, that's negative then. So, this really is a major game changer (garbled) will be multiplied at least by ten, given limited resources. And secondly, Pinky, the cost, the cost will go down to P300. So, that means anyone who wants to have a test can afford it because it's P300 pesos per test.

**WEBB:** I lost you there, how much per test, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Right now, the average cost for a PCR is P3,000, but if we use (garbled) that goes to as low as P300.00(garbled)

**WEBB:** Secretary, apologies. Your coming on and off and sayang po iyong—

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, maybe, I'll turned off my video, so that, it's just audio.

**WEBB:** Okay, let's try to fix that. Sabi po ninyo kasi, from what I heard, Secretary Roque. Ang sabi po ninyo ang PCR test ay P3,000 and because of this major change, it will be for, sir ang narinig ko P300.00 ang PCR?

**SEC. ROQUE:** P300 - oo. Kasi there will be ten people using one test kit. So, it's divided by ten, so it will be P300.00. So, now anyone can afford to have a test. And can you imagine the results, if they are tested, who wants to be tested, we can isolate the positive, as soon we isolate the positive in a massive targeted testing that we are about to embark, you can see that the R-naught (R0), the case reproduction rate, as well as the case doubling rate will go down dramatically.

**WEBB:** Secretary, just for clarification, ka pag mangyari po itong pooled testing na kalalabasan nga is P300.00 ang babayaran ng isang tao. Saan po ito maa-avail, because there's so many questions sir, there was actually a message on viber that was being passed around, kung saan at sino iyong pinakamura. At doon po sa nabasa ko, Sec., and please correct me if I am wrong, ang lumabas po iyong Red Cross ang pinakamura and that was about, if I am not mistaken, sir P4,000.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Hindi naman po, kasi mayroon tayong Project ARK. And Project ARK is project of the private sector in cooperation with government and they have been donating PCR machines in public hospitals and when you go to a Project ARK beneficiary, the test cost anywhere from 1,750 to P2,000. So, marami pa pong mura, iyong mga libreng machines na dinonate ng Project ARK. Pero ang punto nga po if we resort to pooled testing it become even cheaper.

**WEBB:** Secretary, when will this happen?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Okay, they are now in pilot study, they have actually concluded pilot study in children's (garbled)

**WEBB:** Secretary apologies, we are really, we don't have a very good signal. We gonna take a very short break, if we need to have Secretary Roque on the phone so that we can understand him better, let's do that. But in the meantime, let's take a very short break. The Source will be right back.

**WEBB:** You're watching The Source on CNN Philippines, I'm Pinky Webb. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Secretary, I'm sorry, but we're going to have to do this again because the line wasn't very good.

Sabi ninyo po, "major changes," just so for clarification, in very few words, sir, ano po ang major changes that we can expect after July 31?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Massive, massive targeted testing involving pooled testing that would multiply our actual testing by at least ten 'no, and that would reduce the cost of PCR testing to as low as 300 pesos per person.

In addition to that, we will have to reinvigorate tracing using the methods of Baguio City Mayor Magalong and in this regard, you know, we're not just going to rely on individuals are paid to become tracers; we're going to build an army of volunteers 'no courtesy of training materials to be provided by Mayor Magalong so that we can intensify tracing. Hopefully, do as Thailand and Vietnam did, up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree of tracing.

And in this regard, I will tap you, Pinky, to be one of the trainers 'no for the trainers 'no, and hopefully we can devote one of your programs later on actually training individuals on TV on how they can effectively become tracers 'no with or without payment.

And on top of that, Secretary Villar—

**WEBB:** Let's do that, sir. Let's do that, okay.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes—who is the Isolation Czar has committed to build more and more isolation facilities, now that we know that home quarantine should not be resorted to unless you have your own bedroom and bathroom. We are looking at the other mega isolation facility which is the facility in Nueva Ecija which used to be the drug rehab center that's going to open soon. And we are looking at more isolation facilities even in Metro Manila.

And then, we have Usec. Vega, our Treatment Czar, that will rationalize actually hospital beds and ICU beds. If the hospital beds and ICU beds in Manila are at critical level, we will tap even the bed capacity of neighboring Region III and Region IV-A to refer patients to these vacant ICU or hospital beds 'no. So there is now a One Hospital Action Center inaugurated in MMDA which is headed by Usec. Vega.

**WEBB:** Kailan ho mag-uumpisa itong pooled testing? Doon po tayo naiwan before we went on a break, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Oo, we're done with pilot testing. And yesterday, in the IATF meeting, I really prodded DOH to actually allow further pilot testing. So I think what will happen is we will have pilot testing immediately after the new classifications are announced, and this will be a joint effort of the government and private sector through Project ARK.

**WEBB:** I'm assuming, Secretary Roque, that the quarantine status stays with how your describing everything to me right now, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** I cannot preempt the President. But let's put it this way: Sometimes we have to rely less on classifications. We need to be more innovative in our response. We acknowledge that the numbers are rising. We do say that what really matter is the mortality rate, and the mortality rate is below world average; we're more or less around two percent. So we can't say we've been an absolute failure. But we do know that efforts will have to be done to reduce the numbers, and if possible, to do away completely with community transmission which can be done under these contemplated massive targeting testing and invigorated tracing, as well as expanded isolation facilities.

**WEBB:** So, if we are not an absolute failure, sir, what are we?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think, we've been rather successful because we've limited mortality rate, and in the end that's what matters – how many people perished because of the pandemic. I think that strides also in treating COVID, has contributed to this fact that mortality is still way below the world threshold. We can only look at our former colonial master and look at the mess that they're in, the United States 'no and even England. We're far shot from the crisis that they have in the US, in England and the rest of Europe.

And I keep on telling people, do not forget that the same UP-OCTA research group that it's so accurately forecasting the numbers of COVID-19, forecasted it should have been 3.5 million or even more by now if we did not resort to the steps that we did.

So, people, let's give ourselves credit because it's not just government that succeeded; it's the Filipino people that succeeded to be where we are.

**WEBB:** Here's an argument though, sir, that I want to bring in, this from Governor Chiz Escudero, that argument that you used, sir—I'm just going to relate it to what he said, "The it-could-have-been-worse argument is actually a fallacy designed to make people feel good and content with whatever is giving them. We can and should demand more from our leaders who I believe can and will do more. Hindi na dapat puwede-puwede na." That's what he said, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, you don't have to demand because we're doing it. Please remember that IATF is not just the DOH; it's a whole of government approach. And the fact that we have reached the point where pooled testing is now actually in principle allowed 'no shows the stride that we have made 'no in breaking barriers and in accepting new ideas.

Please remember, that even on rapid testing kits, it has to be the President's to order the use of rapid testing kit because until the last minute 'no, the health technical advisory board under the Universal Health Care would not authorize even the purchase of rapid testing kits 'no.

So we are achieving great strides. And as soon as we fully implement pooled testing, you will see a major, major decrease in the case doubling rate, as well as in the R0 or the case reproduction rate.

But of course, I need to stress that people still need... people still need to resort to social distancing—

**WEBB:** Yeah, the health protocols, sir. Wash your hands ...

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, washing of hands and wearing of masks. Although, you know, in our last conversation, there was an international survey which shows that pretty much, people do it 'no except that it's still not a hundred percent. So we should strive for a hundred percent wearing of mask and hundred percent washing of hands and social distancing.

**WEBB:** Yeah, that was a UK study, sir. Let me move to this, COVID-19 now at 83,000—over, rather, 83,000. The country, more or less, sir, the past couple of days was recording about one thousand five hundred, two thousand, there about, sir. This doesn't look like ... this time, sir, it doesn't look like we're going to beat these UP and UST prediction of 85,000 by the end of July, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I'm sad to say, we're not. And to those who were... made fun of my excitement, well, you got what you wanted. The forecast happened, and I see no reason why we should celebrate 'no. it's very sad, but as I have conferred with Professor Ranjit Rye, we should always aim to beat the forecast because we have the tools.

And secondly, it can happen because it happened in Cebu already, that they were able to reduce the transmission and since Cebu was able to do it, we should be able to do it in Metro Manila as well.

**WEBB:** There's another topic that needs to be discussed, there's actually a lot sir, but in relation to what you're saying, the testing, tracing and treating, I wanna talk about the DOH update on hospital beds but we're gonna have to discuss that rather after a very short break. We'll be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

Welcome back to The Source.

Secretary Roque, we have this from the Inquirer. Please confirm, the IATF has approved the reopening of more businesses in GCQ areas which include review centers, gyms, internet shops, personal grooming services and drive-in cinemas. DTI Secretary Ramon Lopez tells Teleradyo, he says this is effective August 1. Can you confirm, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, Secretary Lopez said it but my official statement as IATF Spokesperson will be released anytime now and I would rather wait for the actual release of the statement because there's quite a list of industries that have been reopened and I don't want to make a mistake [laughs].

**WEBB:** Yeah. But sir, lumabas na po eh just a moment sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yeah. Well I'm confirming that there's a lot more that was opened upon recommendation of the DTI but the actual, I hesitate to actually enumerate them because I may miss or I may make a mistake. But I think a few minutes from now, the official release as IATF Spokesperson will be coming out.

**WEBB:** Okay. Sir, let's talk about this very, very important. So major changes, we're going to test more. If you test, you need to treat. So dito po tayo sa treat, you need to isolate them and treat them. Okay, you talked about isolation already. Sabi mo from Secretary Villar, more facilities will be opened here.

The DOH update as of July 28, help us understand the situation sir. When we talk about hospital beds and I'm only talking about NCR: ICU beds at 69% sir; isolation beds 82% and wards beds at 89%. Here's my question sir, with targeted testing, definitely we will find more infected and possibly have to hospitalize those severe and critical cases. Sir, hindi ho ba medyo nauubos na po iyong mga ICU beds and isolation beds natin? Imagine that at 82% and ward beds at 89%?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, the reason is because hospitals only allotted – for government hospitals – 30% of their bed capacity and ICU capacity to COVID patients and the private hospitals are not even able to comply with that administrative order of the DOH, they have pleaded that will remain at 20 for various reasons 'no.

So, what's the solution? The solution is to at least increase COVID bed capacity to up to 50% in all government hospitals and for private hospitals to at least comply with the 30% allotment 'no. The percentages seemed dire, it's because it's reckoned only from a 30-bed capacity allotted for COVID patients. So if you double that capacity, obviously the percentage will reduce 'no, from 80% it will be around 50% 'no. So that seems to be the solution and that is something that Usec. Vega is undertaking now.

I think the One Hospital Command Center is rather effective because it works as an effective referral system. If COVID capacity for ICU for instance in a private hospital in Quezon City is

already full, then they can refer the patient to a neighboring hospital that has still a vacancy 'no. It's actually just coordinating who's got the space so that the patient can go there.

But another milestone of course is that in the treatment of COVID, we now have a lot more experience, we have Remdesivir, we have Avigan, we have now the cannula treatment instead of the ventilators which has really proven to be life-saving more than ventilators have proven themselves to be effective 'no. And of course, we're not discounting the fact that soon there will also be a vaccine.

**WEBB:** All right. Secretary thank you. We're going to have to talk again because I have a lot of other questions with telcos, the President's SONA and China as well, and of course this supposed audit, this call for an audit for the funds of COVID but wala na po tayong oras. But I need to bring this in sir because it's coming from the netizens. Ang tanong po nila, maybe you can just give us something: Will Metro Manila shift back to MECQ? Ito na lang po iyong tanong: Malaki ho ba daw iyong chance?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Metro Manila will be a living experiment and it's an experiment that we believe we can be successful at, and it will be something that we can be proud of.

**WEBB:** Is the experiment shifting to MECQ?

**SEC. ROQUE:** [Laughs] Ikaw talaga... If I were to answer that, then that precludes already the President [laughs]. No, no, no... We know already—

**WEBB:** No. Yeah, but ang tanong po nila malaki ho ba ang chance? Malaki ho ba ang chance na bumalik tayo sa MECQ? I guess you can just answer, malaki o maliit sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Okay, maybe this is how I will respond it 'no. Dalawa kasi iyong criteria 'no, the case doubling rate and our case doubling rate is fine – we're now at 8.9 'no. We actually improved because the higher the case doubling rate is, the longer 'no is the better. But as you mentioned, it's critical care capacity that's the problem 'no because ICU beds, we have reached mga around—as you said, around 80% 'no. But there are steps that can be done – rationalization of hospital beds, including ICU beds is a solution and if we have to, we will build more ICU beds really 'no, for as long as the case doubling rate is under control.

**WEBB:** Okay. So the answer to that sir, is?

**SEC. ROQUE:** [Laughs] I'm still not going to preempt it because the President will be the one to announce it. Okay? [laughs]

**WEBB:** [Laughs] I tried my best. To the netizens, I tried my best but he doesn't want to say anything about that. But it seems from my understanding kay Secretary Roque, it seems like we're staying. Parang status quo tayo 'no, Sec., parang status quo.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Hindi po, definitely it's not going to be status quo. No, it's not going to be status quo. Nothing will be status quo from this classification. There will be, things—

**WEBB:** All right, wala na po talaga tayong oras. Thank you.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**WEBB:** All right. To Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, sir, maraming, maraming salamat po sa inyo. Thank you. Ingat po kayo sir.

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