

**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, thank you for your time and welcome to the show, sir.

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

**WEBB:** All right. Six thousand three hundred fifty-two (6,352) cases yesterday, highest single day increase. Secretary, what's happening?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, we are not alone; it's not as if it's just happening in the Philippines 'no. There has been a report by Nikkei, reporting that 70% of all countries in the world have recorded spikes lately 'no. Now, we have not confirmed whether this has happened in the Philippines but there are reports that the virus has mutated and has become far more infectious than it was. But, the important thing to note is that deaths or mortality rates remain to be very low; an overwhelming 98.5% of the cases continue to be asymptomatic or mild. So, although there are deaths, we are keeping the deaths at a minimum. We're way within the threshold of 5% mortality rate considered as acceptable by the international community, we are at two point something right now as far as mortality rate is concerned.

And of course, for the 1.5% that statistically could be afflicted with the disease in critical manner, we are expanding our capacity to provide critical care; we are building more ICU beds. We have 250 beds coming up in Quirino Memorial Hospital. There is additional—in East Avenue Medical Center, I should say that 250-bed ICU. And then we have additional ICU beds coming up in Quirino, as well as in couple of other hospitals.

We are also building more many isolation facilities because as we increase our actual testing capacity and we have reached our target or 32,000 actual tests a day, there is, of course, a need to provide more isolation facilities for them since ... unless they have their own rooms and own bathrooms, they will have to stay in isolation facilities, which is the lesson that they learned rather late in a day in Wuhan, which we are now implementing through Oplan Kalinga.

So, we are taking steps to revitalize our T3. As I said, we are not stopping at the 32,000 actual tests that we have achieved. We are piloting what is known as pilot testing where we can use one single kit for ... anywhere from 5 to 10 individuals. So that would exponentially increase our testing capacity, not just 32 but minimum multiplied by five at least, 150,000 'no. And with this increased testing capacity, it's also understandable that we have increased number of case being reported because that is precisely the reason why we want to test more – to find out where the virus is, isolate the virus, treat them and trace.

Now, as far as tracing is concerned, we are following the model of Baguio City under the leadership of Mayor Magalong. I had to sit down with him last Saturday to actually understand how it's done; but, Pinky, it's very, very interesting. The rule of thumb in Baguio is every tracer will have to locate at least 30 to 37 close contacts of a COVID positive patient. All of the 30 to 37 are automatically subject to PCR test to find out if they have the disease 'no. And they basically have geographical locations, so they only follow up on COVID positive patients within their area. And if there are individuals outside of their area, then they forward the information to their teammates operating in that area.

So, if we are able to implement this on a nationwide basis, then I think we would be able eventually 'no to curb the rise of incidents because we would be prolonging the case doubling rate of the disease as well as what is known as the  $R_0$  or the number of individuals that a positive patient can infect.

**WEBB:** From an infected person. All right, that's a lot, sir, that you said. I want to go into some of them. We talked about the pooled testing before, 5 to 10 people or individuals in one test. Just a very quick question, sir, when will this happen, the pooled testing?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I know that the pilot will start in Makati. It's supposed to start on the 6<sup>th</sup>. So, I don't know if they have changed their timetable. But the pilot after initial steps have been approved by the Philippine Society of Pathologist will finally start 'no on the 6<sup>th</sup> or thereabouts, definitely within the first two weeks of August.

**WEBB:** All right, because I think there is a meeting between Mayor Abby and probably Secretary Vince, if not yesterday, that will happen today on pooled testing in Makati. Okay, so correct on that, sir.

But beds in Quirino and East Avenue Center, sir. Well and good we need beds, because we are in danger or critical zone. The problem is, sir, the manpower. Nasaan na po iyong mga tao na magbabantay or the nurses, the healthcare workers that will man these hospitals, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, initially this is one of the two reasons why we have temporarily banned the working of nurses abroad because, number one, we don't want to put them in harm's way when they go to areas with very high COVID cases; and number two, we may need them here.

Number two, learning from the experience of Cebu, the DOH is now recruiting in areas with very low COVID cases preferably around the Metro Manila and the provinces that are under MECQ. But at the same time, I have read the DOH appealing for doctors and nurses from the Visayas and Mindanao to come help in Metro Manila for the time being, which was also what was done in Cebu. There was temporary hiring of health workers at the peak of the pandemic in Cebu City. So, we are doing and adopting the same strategy for Metro Manila and the four provinces that are under MECQ as well.

I understand that in addition to the usual pay—well, to begin with, most of the nurses will be working in private hospitals 'no. And since it is the DOH that is employing them – whether be

it temporarily or permanently – they will be enjoying the benefits of government health workers which is substantially more compared to what a private hospitals are paying them. So, there is already a pay incentive there and there are also other incentives being thrown their way, such as free accommodation, free testing and free insurance.

**WEBB:** Yeah, but when we talk about a recalibrated strategy, sir, something that medical groups have wanted to be able to have a timeout, sir. The question rally is: How soon can this happen? I am not sure, sir, if you were able to answer that question. I missed maybe the first 30 seconds of what you said; I didn't hear you, sir. So ang tanong ko po, kailan po sila darating?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I think they are arriving as we speak now. Of course, they won't arrive at the same time. But we have had some success – I will give you the data – as far as recruitment is concerned. I have no doubts that our health workers are amongst the most nationalistic and the most humanist of all professions. I think they will heed the call of the DOH to come work in Metro Manila for the time being. And as I said, the DOH has given them a package that is rather attractive especially if you are a health professional, a nurse working for a private hospital outside of Metro Manila. I mean, the free accommodations by itself makes the whole package very attractive. But I can give you the details later. I don't have the details now on how many we have recruited so far.

**WEBB:** Good, sir. Because I think Usec. Vergeire was also saying in an interview earlier on ANC that ... she said that they are finalizing the number of health workers that they need today. So maybe we will get that answer later on in the day.

Sir, one more thing in relation to what you earlier said on my first question, you said contact tracers are very, very important obviously and according to Mayor Magalong, it's one contact tracer to 30 to 37 individuals. According to Usec. Vergeire, we have so far 77,000 contact tracers, Secretary Roque, and we need a 150,000. Don't we need that as soon as possible, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** We need that as soon as possible, but learning from the experience of Baguio, Mayor Magalong did not have to recruit additional personnel. He is using actually the PNP 'no for contact tracing which is something that we will also implement here. The PNP leadership has signified their conforme to this and they are in the process of training now the police officers that will act as contact tracers 'no.

The beauty in the Magalong formulation is while local government units can hire and pay for additional contact tracers up to a hundred fifty thousand of them, the police, because they are already employed by the government, can be tapped to do the same chore without additional remuneration. That has been the experience of Baguio. So if you ask Mayor Magalong, he says that they should not be additional cost to contact tracing.

**WEBB:** So how many members of the PNP will be tapped as contact tracers?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, it really depends on how many they can afford to detail for this purpose. Again, I'm not sure about the figures. But the experience of Baguio is we did not have to go out of his way to actually designate policemen to do specifically contact tracing because he operates by way of—how do you put that? He basically divided the city into groups, into clusters. And the police who are working in the area anyway are told also to perform contact tracing task. So they just operate within their geographical unit. The follow up on individuals who reside in their assigned area. And if in the course of talking to them they happen to come across a name who had close contact with the person in a different area, they simply communicate this to their counterpart in that particular area so that person can [unclear] do contact tracing on that other person.

So I think on Friday, which is our next press briefing – we have no press briefing on Thursday but it will be on Friday – we made a short video of Mayor Magalong's presentation. And I think it is important to show this to everyone because he has a rather simple, in expensive way of performing contact tracing. But as I emphasized, one thing that I only learn from that Saturday meeting with Mayor Magalong is that anyone who was identified as having had close contact with the person is not just told to isolate, they are actually given a PCR test. And to him, to Mayor Magalong, that is ... it's non-negotiable that all these who had close contact with the positive patient should be given PCR tests. And I think because we have now increased daily capacity for this test, we can do it.

**WEBB:** And if that is so, sir, itong 6,352, is this a cause for concern, sir? Or is this something ... is this kind of number, the number we should expect in the next day, sir, in the next coming days?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, as I said, Pinky, it's not just happening in the Philippines. Let's not have this wrong cue that, "Uy, the Philippines is having this many increase in cases." It's happening in 70% of the planet right now. And maybe it is because of the mutation of the virus also 'no.

But you know, I emphasized "maybe" because UP [unclear] Center has not confirmed that this mutated virus has actually landed in our shores. But in any case, we're not alone. Everyone will have to intensify their 3Ts, and there is no other strategy in dealing with COVID-19 other than intensifying your T3. And I think we are heading the right direction because we did not spare any expense. We open as many labs as we could at unprecedented time – I'm very proud of the achievements of Sec. Vince Dizon in this regard. I think we have the distinction of having opened the most labs in such a short period of time, from one to 90 plus now over a period of five months, and we are opening more because we are not satisfied with the current testing.

But that's key because as soon as we detect who are infected, then that is where we apply the invigorated tracing system of Mayor Magalong, and then we [no audio]

**WEBB:** So because 70% of the countries are experiencing a spike, sir, it's almost as if, my understanding from your answer is that this was expected, this 6,352, sir? Just to clarify that.

**SEC. ROQUE:** It's not expected but it's been experienced by an overwhelming majority of countries worldwide. It's not just in the Philippines. Maybe it's in the disease. Now overseas, they have confirmed that it has mutated, it has become far more infectious, five times more infectious. We don't know yet scientifically if it has come to our shores but most likely it has. It's a matter of time, perhaps, before the UP [unclear] Center can confirm it. But it's a reality that everyone in this planet will have to face. And despite what the political opposition says, as I said 'no, it's not just in the Philippines where it's happening; it's worldwide.

**WEBB:** We'll be taking a short break. Coming up, Secretary Roque and I will talk about the alleged widespread corruption at the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

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

All right, Secretary, there's a lot of reaction on this 70% of spike worldwide because we can also again compare ourselves to our neighboring countries. Right now, we are number 2, I believe, in South East Asia; number one is Indonesia in terms of number infected. We are 1,000 behind from last I researched, sir.

But anyway, I need to talk about other things - Rapid tests.

Secretary Harry, is this something government will still encourage and is this something government will still implement because there is this perception—well, at least Dr. Dans of the Philippine Society of General Internal Medicine was saying that this should not be used as this could contribute or have contributed to the number of infections, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I think that's a personal opinion of Dr. Dans. Other doctors also support the use of rapid test kits in conjunction with PCR tests. In the Philippines, we have never encouraged RTK or rapid test kits as a stand-alone test. We always say that it should be used in conjunction with PCR, recognizing that PCRs are still the most accurate.

I hesitate to call them as a gold standard because just like rapid test kits, there are now many cases of false positives registered using PCR tests because much of it depends on, number one, the manner by which the specimen was collected and number two, sometimes it's the incompatibility between testing kits and machines itself. I know of many high-profile individuals who had false positives also under PCR.

So, no test is perfect and that's why you have to complement the use of PCR with rapid testing kits especially in a country like the Philippine where until recently we did not have enough tests. Even if we have 32,000 tests per day now - capability, the reality is not everyone can still get them and the manner by which they are used by Project ARK, which is still in conjunction with PCR tests, I think should, not be discouraged because it's still produces the result that we want which is to find out who amongst our population are infected with the disease.

Now, I'd like to point out that yesterday, the Department of Health came up with data on the clustering of COVID cases and contrary to the claim of Dr. Dans, the clustering were in the community, in jails and in hospitals. Now, who are using rapid test kits now? It's the corporations and there's no clusters observed in the workplaces right now. So it cannot be that as Dr. Dans said that it is the use of rapid test kits are responsible for the widespread infections of COVID-19.

On the contrary, the data of DOH will belie that conclusion. The data will support that perhaps rapid test kits are doing what they're supposed to do which is operate as initial screening until individuals are able to get PCR tests.

**WEBB:** Okay. All right. I need to shift topic, sir – PhilHealth. I know you have a lot to say about this, this is something we discussed even in the past. I think—

**SEC. ROQUE:** [Laughs] ...Don't get me started Pinky [laughs].

**WEBB:** We were already calling out President Morales of PhilHealth. No, I have to get you started, sir. No, sir, we need to understand the situation. Let's look at what was said yesterday. Atty. Keith of the Anti-Fraud Team of PhilHealth—former rather, said 15 billion pesos was stolen or misused by the mafia or PhilHealth executives. I wanted to ask you, is 15 billion—does this sound about right to you or do you think this is exaggerated or understated even?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, you know, when we initially brought to the public's attention the WellMed scam 'no, I was no longer Spokesperson then, I was a private individual. We also had a source who said that for a period of time, PhilHealth lost about 174 billion more or less. And that is why if you look at what Atty. Keith said, perhaps he's giving us an accurate estimate because he's not the only one who says that.

And what is somehow making people believe Atty. Keith, is he is an anti-fraud investigator and initially when he resigned, Gen. Morales denied that he was an anti-fraud investigator and for simply—who was a simple as showing his ID that he is in fact an anti-fraud investigator. And the initial attempt of Gen. Morales to disclaim his employment as being an anti-fraud investigator I think is crucial because that established the credibility of Atty. Keith and I think Gen. Morales knew that as well, that's why he had to attempt to destroy his credibility by saying he had nothing to do with fraud investigation.

So, someone who is familiar with the pattern of fraud perpetrated in the PhilHealth, I would say that's convincing because I had another source that said that more or less that's how much money is being lost annually.

**WEBB:** 15B?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, and of course even in—for accounting purposes, they recognized that there will be 2% wastage on fraud itself and this is an accepted figure worldwide ‘no. But of course, the 15 billion has exceeded the 2% ceiling recognized by accountants worldwide.

**WEBB:** Well, that’s where I wanted to go. The President said President Morales was saying the 10 billion lost in fraudulent claims in 2019, I was going to ask you that. Is that even acceptable because if you ask, I’m sure, sir, all of us who pay our PhilHealth contributions, 10 billion is not something easy to digest, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, that’s not something that we can digest and we should never digest. We should never accept that even a single peso is lost through corruption because precisely the law which I authored in the Lower House - Universal Healthcare, will not be implemented correctly unless every single peso that the state invests in PhilHealth is used towards providing the people with free medicine and free healthcare. So every centavo counts, we cannot afford to lose 10 billion, not even 1 peso for that matter.

**WEBB:** Yeah. But when there is such a statement, sir, that 10 billion pesos could have been lost in fraudulent claims, that’s not—I guess that’s just not acceptable, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** It is not and that’s why my beef against Gen. Morales is I have no evidence that he is corrupt himself. But when he was placed there by the President to replace a previous board and a previous president because of the WellMed scam, our expectation is he will take concrete steps to rid the agency of corruption.

**WEBB:** Yeah.

**SEC. ROQUE:** And yesterday what worried me was he admitted that corruption was still rampant and I did not hear steps that he has taken to remove corruption in the agency – that to me, is the most worrisome.

**WEBB:** All right. Okay. Secretary Roque, we need to take a very short break. We’ll be right back. [BREAK]

We’re back on The Source, I only have time for one more question. Secretary Roque, do you think Gen. Morales should take a leave of absence or resign?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That’s really up to him. I’m not in a position to tell him what to do. The President has said that he will not fire him unless there’s evidence and I think the Senate now is in the process of documenting this evidence, at the same time there’s also parallel investigation being conducted by Usec. Quitain. So it’s his decision whether or not he wants to go on leave while these investigations are ongoing but I’m just happy that 2 branches of government are investigating these allegations of fraud because as I said, our Universal Healthcare Law cannot succeed unless we rid PhilHealth of corruption.

**WEBB:** All right. Okay, I have a follow up question on that but we don't have time. We're going to continue this discussion on Facebook. In the meantime, I'd like to thank as usual Secretary Harry Roque for joining us on The Source. Thank you, sir, and thank you for joining us here on The Source. I'm Pinky Webb, we'll be back on Facebook.

Stay tuned for that.

**WEBB:** Okay. You're watching The Source on CNN Philippines. I'm Pinky Webb and we're back.

Sec. Roque, so, you're saying you're not in a position, of course, to tell the general, Gen. Morales to resign or take a leave of absence. However, you had previously said, I believe in June, that he had failed to clean up the mess - not in those words, sir - inside the agency.

Given that, sir, that you said that two months ago and then these allegations yesterday that came out in the Senate, sir, what is your position? Now, has he failed miserably? Ganoon ho ba iyon from two months ago?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, let's just say that unlike two months ago, authorities are finally investigating him. No less than the Office of the President through Usec. Quitain has started this investigation and now the Senate is conducting a very public investigation of the issue.

I think, we can only keep the stench from coming out for a little period of time but you can't actually prevent it from seeping out and that's what's happening now. The truth is being uncovered and I will just say that I'm very supportive of both investigations and I think the investigations are being conducted in a manner that accords Gen. Morales and everyone in PhilHealth the right to due process, they are being heard and I would rather not make any judgments as of now, I will wait for the results of the investigation.

But I'd like to highlight again that I have full faith and confidence in the investigation being conducted by both the Senate and the Office of the President.

**WEBB:** So, when do you think the Office of the President will have an initial result on their investigation on the alleged irregularities in PhilHealth?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I can't say. But Usec. Quitain was also the same person who investigated WellMed and that led to the firing of the private sector members of the Board of Directors of PhilHealth as well as replacing the president with its current president, Gen. Morales and that happened, if I'm not mistaken, in under two months, okay?

If I'm not mistaken, because it caused a lot of news, it caused a lot of noise and it was not disputed that the dead were able to get dialysis benefits and there was a quick response from the President.

So, I'm confident that the President will also prompt his own office, Usec. Quitain, a former city administrator of his in Davao, to hasten the investigation so he can decide on the fate of the officials of PhilHealth.

**WEBB:** There was a report, sir, that PACC commissioner Greco Belgica said that they are readying cases that will be filed against PhilHealth before the Office of the Ombudsman?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, thank you for reminding me. I'd like to thank also the PACC for their own investigation, so, there are now three investigations and the PACC fortunately appeared to have finished theirs and we're hoping that this will lead in fact to the filing of cases.

Morales, of course, has always said that I'm a lawyer I should file cases. I have filed cases but I don't think it is my duty now as Presidential Spokesperson to continue filing these cases and I'm happy that PACC has announced that they will.

**WEBB:** So, can I get an update on that, the cases that you previously filed before the Office of the Ombudsman regarding PhilHealth corruption? Any update on that, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** You know, unfortunately, there has not been any pronouncements from the Office of the Ombudsman, which is not to say that they are not doing anything, because what I do know is as soon after we filed our cases and this was only about five months ago, they already formed a task force to investigate PhilHealth.

And I believed they have been conducting the investigation very quietly and that anytime now, I believe that the Ombudsman would make public also the results of the investigation because I think five months is more than ample time for them to conduct the investigation.

Taking into consideration also that of that five months we were under ECQ and MECQ for about two months, so, let's also understand that they are constrained by the COVID-19 virus in conducting the investigation.

**WEBB:** Does the President still have trust and confidence in Gen. Morales, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, according to Sen. Bong Go, he still does but he wants to see the evidence. If there's evidence that would affect his trust and confidence, then of course it could change and that's why I'm hoping all these investigations - three investigations - will document the evidence that the President wants to see.

**WEBB:** Are you hoping that he be replaced, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, let' just say he has articulated in the Senate that he is unable to actually deal with corruption in the PhilHealth and I think the president of PhilHealth, aside from knowing the framework of Universal Healthcare which is the law that the agency is now supposed to implement, should also have the resources and the means to deal with

corruption because clearly in the Universal Healthcare policy, the biggest threat to that is corruption.

So, any president in PhilHealth should be able to say, I know what to do with corruption in the agency and I will do it.

**WEBB:** So, would you rather that he be replaced, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, my problem, Pinky, is I'm a Presidential Spokesperson. I have no personal thoughts of my own right now in this job, so, I'd rather repeat what the President has said. He wants to see the evidence against Gen. Morales if there's any.

**WEBB:** Okay. But you were also Presidential Spokesperson in June, sir, when you said that he wasn't successful in cleaning up the agency that's why I'm pressing that question, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's a fact because he has admitted this also in the Senate. He has repeatedly said that corruption persists in the PhilHealth and I think that's a declaration that he has made. In law, that's called a declaration against interest but I leave his faith to the President because after all he is a Presidential appointee.

**WEBB:** But also, Secretary, of course, there's always two sides of the story. We have Atty. Keith saying this that P15 billion was stolen or was misused by executives of PhilHealth and of course, you also have the side of Gen. Morales.

There is of course—there is so much to discuss, sir. The IT issue which was supposed to be padded, sir, by thousands of percent. This Adobe, the switches even, sir. Anyway, madami po iyon na nai-discuss kahapon. I would, maybe able to discuss that tomorrow with the senator.

So, as a last question on this, sir, I guess what I wanted to find out from you, in the middle of a pandemic where we are expecting solid insurance company na binabayaran po natin every month, every three months or every six months or every year, depende kung anong kaya ng tao, and then we hear of, again, these allegations. What do you say to the public, sir, in the middle of a pandemic na inaasahan ho siguro natin na kahit papaano masasalba din tayo noon gaging insurance company, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's why I think after the evidence are unearthed, the President will move and do the correct thing. He knows that people are counting on PhilHealth at the time of a pandemic and we cannot afford the citizenry to lose their faith and trust in the agency that is most relevant to them when there is a threat of disease.

I'm confident that the President will up to the challenge. He knows, he's being a seasoned public servant and he knows that it is indispensable to restore the people's trust and confidence in this agency.

**WEBB:** All right. Just a breaking news, sir, that there are two Filipinos who died and six injured in Beirut, Lebanon explosion earlier today. This is confirmed by the Department of Foreign Affairs. Secretary, what is the plan of government regarding our kababayans over there in Lebanon, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I think the government will continue with its repatriation of nationals who wish to be evacuated from the area. Lebanon as we know is war-torn. We've had issued series of advisories against working in Lebanon. I believe the DFA will intensify our efforts to bring home our kababayan in that war-torn area.

**WEBB:** Sec. Harry Roque, sir, so no press briefing on Thursday? This will happen on Friday, we'll air that.

In the meantime, sir, maraming salamat po sa inyong oras and take care, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Thank you very much and good morning.

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