

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 Source and thank you as always for your time.

SEC. ROQUE: Good morning, Pinky. Unfortunately, Zoom is a bit choppy this morning. So, but nonetheless, I [garbled] the opportunity to be with you by the telephone.

WEBB: Before we talk about the General Community Quarantine status, Secretary, let's first talk about the earthquake that hit Masbate yesterday, 6.6 magnitude earthquake. What kind of assistance is government sending the officials and the residents of Masbate?

SEC. ROQUE: I would like to assure our Masbateño brothers and sisters that help has been prepositioned and further assistance is on the way. We are talking about food packs; we are talking about water; we are talking about blankets; we are talking about the things that they would need in resettlement areas and, of course, there will be manpower also to ensure that even in temporary evacuation areas that there would be social distancing because of the threat of the COVID-19.

One thing going for Masbate is that they have very low cases of COVID-19, but nonetheless, they should not be too complacent; even if they will be staying in temporary shelters, they have to observe social distancing. As I said, the President would want to go, I don't know if he can actually go because of restrictions in his movement right now. But whatever help that Masbate needs is forthcoming. We have a direct line all ready with the governor, as well as with the Mayor of Cataingan. So the coordination effort to deliver what is needed by the residents of Cataingan is in full blast.

WEBB: So, there is no decision yet if the President will actually make it to Masbate?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I'm sure that the President really wants to go. But whether or not he will be able to make it, I will find out later in the day.

WEBB: All right, let's go to the General Community Quarantine status now. We are back to that, Metro Manila and nearby provinces as well. The government calls this strategy rebooted, recalibrated. Can you tell us how do you assess government's preparedness for this GCQ?

SEC. ROQUE: Before I go to that, let me announce that last night, there was an NTF meeting and we considered the recommendations of the mayors to actually impose a stricter GCQ. Because when we consulted the mayors, they were in agreement that it should be GCQ but it

should be of the strict type similar to what was imposed in June when we first went on GCQ. So, I am announcing the following 'no:

1. Even if we are in GCQ, mass gathering is limited to ten persons only, religious services included. That means, it is no longer the case that religious gathering is allowed up to ten or 10% of the capacity, it is now only ten people strictly, no longer 10%. It's ten individuals.
2. We have not yet allowed the operation of gyms, of internet cafes, as well as review centers and tutorial centers. They will still not be allowed. There is a bit of confusion here because DTI issued guidelines that these are allowed, but actually before MECQ was imposed, the Cabinet, in an emergency meeting presided by ES, had decided to temporarily suspend the opening of these new businesses and that Cabinet resolution stands, which was reaffirmed in an NTF meeting last night. So, I repeat, gyms, internet cafes, review centers and tutorial centers are still not allowed to operate under GCQ 'no.
3. Likewise, back riders are now allowed. If they have the same address, they are not required to wear the barriers. But however, there are still required to wear helmet, face mask and face shield. If they are of different addresses, then they will have to use the Angkas-type barrier. But in any case, only private motorcycles are allowed and the wearing of face mask, face shield and helmet are mandatory. And, of course the passenger must be an Authorized Person Outside of Residence or an APOR.

WEBB: APOR. Anything else, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Wait, I am trying to recall my notes because it was only last night that this was agreed upon. Just to make sure—

WEBB: There was something, Secretary, that I read yesterday, that I saw on television. It had a question on gyms—

SEC. ROQUE: Of course, just when you are trying to retrieve your notes, it's not cooperating. But I'm still trying to retrieve. If within the program, I can retrieve it then I will read it. But those are the two most noteworthy issuances that were agreed upon yesterday.

WEBB: So there are two things also that need clarification. One is, there is supposed to be this unified curfew among all LGUS.

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you, the unified curfew now is from 8:00-5:00, it's 8:00-5:00. I understand the mayors voted, and there was the majority that the curfew hours should be 8:00-5:00.

WEBB: And another thing, Secretary Roque. With regards to salons, there was also an interview with Mayor Olivares, if I am not mistaken, because they wanted a stricter GCQ. Are there still questions if salons and barber shops can open or sigurado na pong makakapagbukas sila?

SEC. ROQUE: Okay, now the restaurants, dine-in and the salons will remain open, however the capacity will depend on the LGUs. They will now determine if it's 30 or 50, but we leave it now to the LGUs to determine the capacity of dine-ins, as well as the salons.

WEBB: Okay. So bukas po sila, it's just a matter of capacity ang pinag-uusapan. Puwedeng mag-iba-iba per LGU?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, because that is what the mayors asked, to have more discretion in opening sensitive industries and businesses.

WEBB: All right, let's go back to my earlier question. How would you rate or even assess government preparedness, this time around for this GCQ?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, Pinky, what happened was, although we gave in to the timeout of our frontliners, we also used the opportunity to reboot and rehash our responses to COVID. To begin with, we piloted in the two-week period of what is known as the CODE, where health workers and barangay workers went on a house-to-house in search of symptomatics and the symptomatics are given a swab test, PCR swab test and isolated for the time being. That has proved effective and that is why, while we have imposed GCQ, we will follow strict localized or granular lockdown; and in the areas affected by granular lockdown, there will be house-to-house also visits by health professionals in search of symptomatics. They will be given PCR test and they will be isolated.

Likewise, we are now building more isolation facilities. As you know, the Department of Education has agreed to lend us 50% of all schools. While they are not ready for immediate use, we are looking forward to using these for isolation centers.

Meanwhile, in addition to the existing isolation centers, we have the Razon Group committing to build another 500-beds isolation facility in where Nayong Pilipino is supposed to be.

We have also used the two-week opportunity to improve our critical care capacity. We have now inaugurated only yesterday a 200-bed all COVID hospital in an annex building at East Avenue Medical Center. We are building additional ICU beds and additional COVID beds in the grounds of Quezon Institute, as well as in Quirino Memorial Hospital and in PGH as well.

We are actually building, what we call this, modular or tent-like facilities also to accommodate more patients because we know that while Metro Manila's case doubling rate warrants GCQ, we know that there is a stress or there's a pressure now on the health capacity, and that's why in the two-week period, we managed to build as many additional bed capacity as we could.

And on top of that, of course, the DPWH is still building not just ordinary buildings but buildings that can be erected within a period of two weeks to improve our critical care capacity.

So we took advantage of the two-week break asked by our frontliners to improve capacity, improve testing, isolation, as well as our tracing capacity.

Mayor Magalong has been very busy training all over the Philippines on the proper way to do tracing. Although, his model is one positive person to 37 individuals should be traced, I think in Metro Manila that would not be practical so we have agreed on one positive to 10 to 15 people to be traced. And these individuals will be given swab test right away, and if need be, isolated when facilities are already available; because we have learned these from the mistakes of other countries that unless they have their own rooms and bathroom, they must be kept in isolation facilities.

So it's a refresh approach to COVID. We gave in to the demands of the frontliners, and we took advantage of the break that they sought to improve not just testing, tracing, isolation and treatment but also our hospital capacity as well.

WEBB: Secretary, just to clarify and very briefly this search, these house-to-house searches, who will conduct this and who is the lead? And are the police going to be doing this, conducting this as well together with the LGU?

SEC. ROQUE: The police will not have any business going on a house-to-house; it's really health professionals. It's DOH; it's the municipal health officers; it's community nurses; it's barangay health workers, and they will just be, you know, going from house-to-house, looking for symptomatics.

This is actually something that we followed or adopted from Mumbai, India, and it has proven to be hugely successful in the two-week period that we piloted. It has been proven successful as well and it's manageable. We may not be able to do it in all barangays simultaneously but we certainly will start with the areas with the highest clusters of COVID-19.

So I don't think the public should worry. This is a purely health initiative.

WEBB: All right. We will be taking a very short break. The Source will be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

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

Secretary, there's a WHO report that says it's the younger people aged 20 to 40 who are the ones most infected by the virus and possibly spreading it as they are the ones who have mild

or no symptoms; and they actually suggest to redouble our efforts. Any additional measure to address this?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, definitely. As we said, we're moving towards expanding our isolation facilities. We could see that we probably will not have enough for the time being although we field quite a number of We Heal as One Centers, as well as Ligtas Centers maintained by the local government units. But if they are, for instance, 4,000 positives daily, if you're going to trace 10 of their closest contacts, that's going to be 40,000 a day of individuals that you would have to isolate.

So we're moving towards that direction [that's] why transforming and refurbishing our public schools to house these individuals. But it can't be done as of yet because as you know, it doesn't happen overnight. But we are expanding our capacity building really, the tent-like structures. And we appreciate, of course, the effort of the private sector in rushing these facilities as well.

But we realize that there is no other alternative but also to subject to institutional isolation even the close contacts of those that have tested positive. And one thing going for us is, of course, we have now the capacity to conduct tests on more than 32,000 individuals. So all those who had close contacts with the positive can also be subjected to testing now.

WEBB: So, here's the question, Secretary, good you brought that up because if we averaged 4,000 infections a day and a close contact would be times ten, you know, more or less, sir, and you're already admitting that we still need to build more quarantine facilities, when do you think is the time that we will have enough knowing that we have this number of 4,000 on an average new cases daily? Kailan ho kaya masasabi na mayroon na tayong sapat na quarantine facilities to house possibly infected individuals?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we need also to await the passage of Bayanihan II because refurbishing even the public schools would incur expenses. But the good thing is, with the public schools, we don't really have to build structures, we just have to buy bed, linens, and provide for kitchen for these public schools when we use them as isolation centers.

But in addition to public schools, we are actually booking every hotel room that we can because tourism is not allowed anyway in GCQ. So, we are going to commandeer almost all of the hospital beds available. We're going beyond, not hospital, but hotel beds. We're going also beyond hotel beds, we're going to commandeer as well dormitories that are available, anything and everything that we can use for isolation purposes without having to build new ones. Of course, the new ones are forthcoming as well.

Fort Magsaysay also will be converted into an isolation, a mega isolation facility. So, the effort now, is really to improve our capacity for tracing and because we have improved tracing now, we need more isolation facilities and that's what the reboot is all about.

WEBB: In your press briefing yesterday, I saw a slide on individuals who will be tested, who will be PCR-tested. These are the priority workers such as those in the tourism and hospitality industry, you said that every four weeks; and then manufacturing companies in eco zones located in special concerns, every three months. Tell us the process by which this will be done. Sino ho ang gagawa? For example, let's just do a specific example. You said tourism and hospitality industry – Siargao, you said, Boracay and El Nido. There needs to be a PCR testing lab there before this can actually happen.

SEC. ROQUE: And they do now. Bohol will ... I think, already has its own PCR lab. And of course, Antique has its—well, Aklan has its own PCR lab now. What we're doing is by issuing those guidelines, those protocols, these individuals can now avail of free PCR testing because it will be now paid for by PhilHealth.

So, without the protocol, normally, it would be only symptomatic individual entitled to free PCR testing; but this has enabled now frontliners in the manufacturing, as well as the tourism industry, to avail also of free PCR testing.

WEBB: Yeah. But what happens really, sir, obviously in these areas because there is—every four weeks for the tourism; every three months for manufacturing companies in eco zones, kailangan ho talaga may malapit na PCR testing in that area?

SEC. ROQUE: Mayroon po.

WEBB: I guess that's what I'm trying to say.

SEC. ROQUE: We have already ensured that. We have ensured that already because we now have an excess of 101 laboratories and many of the laboratories are not just in Metro Manila but all over the country, particularly our tourism destination.

And talking of isolation again, the private sector again, be credited because they are now preparing isolation facilities for their own workers. So, it's not just government preparing isolation facilities, even companies now will be maintaining isolation facilities for their employees who tests positive.

So, it's actually an act of bayanihan that both the private and public sectors are now focusing on tracing and isolation.

WEBB: Questions about the President's health are brewing after rumors that he left for Singapore over the weekend. Of course, the President already said he was in Davao this whole time. We'll be talking about this with the Presidential Spokesperson after the break.

We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

WEBB: You are watching “The Source” on CNN Philippines. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

Secretary, still a lot of topics to discuss. First, the President’s health. Hindi na po ito natigil-tigil. There are rumors he flew possibly to Singapore. Noong nakita po siya, sinasabi ng iba medyo maliit daw iyong isa niyang mata; iyong iba sinasabi inaakay-akay siya. And then I know that you said “No,” you said that the President was in high spirit. He seems strong especially when he talked about the war on drugs.

How can this be finally put to rest or should you allow the public to just keep speculating on the President’s health?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, the public should no longer speculate because they have seen him. In evidence, what we refer to as object evidence is the best kind of evidence; and object evidence here is the President himself.

So, I think his appearance, his conduct, his actuation is proof that he is well and healthy. So, I understand that many of our detractors are sad that the President is fine but they would just have to wait until 2022 because the President is healthy and is in control.

So, I think you saw that, everyone saw that and I would like to see the President more often in fact, if it is possible.

WEBB: Does he get tired of this speculation on his health? Naiinis na ho ba siya?

SEC. ROQUE: Alam mo, seasoned public servant na itong si Presidente. He’s amused that so many people are wishing him ill but he is confident that he still has the support of an overwhelming majority of our people.

WEBB: But if he were to leave whether it of be official business or even of course leisure, will the President inform the public? Does the public have the right to know whether it’s government funds or otherwise?

SEC. ROQUE: He said so. If he leaves, he will not make it secret. So let’s hold the President to his promise ‘no that when he does go abroad, he will inform the people. In any case, when he does go abroad, he will have to go on leave and he will have to designate a caretaker and we would know who the caretaker would be.

In other words, going abroad for the President is very difficult to be a secret event because the designation of a caretaker, as well of course as the right of the people to be informed ‘no where he’s whether be it its official or personal. But as the President said, he gains nothing by making it secret.

WEBB: Secretary Duque was present in yesterday's PhilHealth hearing at the Senate. Somebody actually called him—one of the Regional Vice President called him the 'godfather' of this alleged mafia. Another also said that he was responsible for the woes of PhilHealth. Beginning 2004 with his Oplan—rather Plan 5M ahead of the 2004 elections then between Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Fernando Poe, Jr.; some senators are saying poor leadership. Does the President still continue to have trust and confidence in Secretary Duque?

SEC. ROQUE: He does because if he has ceased to have trust and confidence then Secretary Duque would no longer be in office 'no because all Cabinet members serve at the pleasure of the President. In any case, the ongoing investigation in the Senate is about PhilHealth and the President himself has created a task force to address the many issues and he's awaiting for the report of the task force. He gave them only a period of one month to render their findings and to exercise powers that even the Senate could not, including the power to impose preventive suspension and to conduct lifestyle check in addition to filing of cases in court.

WEBB: And then comes the remark, many are reminded of the remark of the President about whiff of corruption. Where does these all come into play with regards or in connection to Secretary Duque?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I think everyone is accorded the right to due process and that's why he created the task force 'no. But you have to remember also that there are issues being raised against Secretary Duque and he has been cleared 'no by the Ombudsman 'no. I remember that the issue about the PhilHealth cards although it was in fact used in an impeachment complaint against then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the complaint formally filed with the Ombudsman was dismissed by Ombudsman Conchita Morales.

WEBB: Is he wearing too many hats, Secretary Roque, you think? He's the Department of Health Secretary, he is IATF Chairperson, he is the Chairman of PhilHealth and he even is assigned to one city as 'Big Brother'. Some could possibly say that, baka masyadong maraming ginagawang trabaho or tasks si Secretary Duque. What do you think?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, in a time of pandemic, you could imagine that the Secretary of Health will be the busiest person 'no in the country. I think his designation in PhilHealth is because he is ex-officio as Secretary of Health and his designation as IATF Chair is also because he is Secretary of Health 'no. So in other words although there are many hats, it is still in connection with the fact that he remains to be the Secretary of Health.

WEBB: May sinabi ho siyang kailangan niyang mag-soul search. Do you think it's time for him to start soul searching, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: No, I leave that to Secretary Duque because I have no authority to speak for him 'no. I'm only speaking on behalf of the President and I think what's important is... your question, for as long as Secretary Duque remains then he enjoys the trust and confidence of the President.

WEBB: There was a question asked of course by some, even Senator Bong Go, if it's time to abolish the PhilHealth and create another agency. What do you think? Kailangan na ho bang patayin muna itong PhilHealth at gumawa na lang ng bago o puwede pang linisin the existing agency that we have?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, in my version of the Universal Healthcare which was actually approved by the House Committee on Health 'no when I sponsored and authored the Universal Healthcare, I did abolish PhilHealth. I wanted to replace with it with the National Health Service patterned after the UK because I borrowed anyway Universal Healthcare after the UK legislation and the Thai legislation, and I was surprised that although it was adopted by the committee, what I eventually defended in the floor, was completely different.

It was PhilHealth still and even given more powers 'no and I was initially really screaming my head off in the plenary hall of Congress until the then Deputy Speaker Pia Cayetano called me by telephone, she was then presiding and said, "*Huwag ka nang magwala diyan, ayusin na lang natin sa Senado,*" because JV Ejercito is Chairman of the Health Committee and that's when I pacified myself and proceeded to defend the bill 'no. Only to find out of course that in the Senate, PhilHealth was also not abolished and rather than be a hindrance 'no, I thought it was more important to pass the bill to send the policy that there should be free medical care and medicines to the government 'no.

But personally, as a legislator, I attempted to abolish PhilHealth and replace it with the National Health Service.

WEBB: Thank you, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Take care.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. Can I repeat again the announcement from the NTF because I have my notes now, very quickly if I can do that?

My notes indicate that the following were approved by the NTF last night and this was also approved in a previous Cabinet meeting presided by the Executive Secretary. Although Metro Manila will be under GCQ: Number one, we will pursue aggressively the policy of localized and granular lockdowns. There will be no mass gatherings. Mass gatherings are limited only to 10 persons inclusive of religious services.

There will be no gyms, internet cafes, review centers and tutorial centers, they will remain closed. The restaurants and salons can open but the capacity to be determined by the LGUs. Curfews are from 8 to 5. LGUs can issue quarantine passes 'no even under GCQ. Needless to say in areas that are covered by localized or granular lockdowns, quarantine passes are a must and back ride is allowed provided the passenger is an APOR. If they live in the same address, no need for barrier; but if they live in different addresses, it will have to be Angkas-like barriers.

Thank you very much.

WEBB: Maraming salamat, Secretary Roque.

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