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INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY PINKY WEBB – HEADSTART/CNN PHILIPPINES
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WEBB: Secretary Roque, welcome to The Source and maraming salamat po sa inyong oras.

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you very much. It's also a pleasure, Pinky, and glad to be back.

WEBB: Secretary, we missed you last week. So, any update on the policy on the reduced physical distancing?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we had a six-hour meeting yesterday to reassess the policy which was previously approved by the IATF, and the body came up with a recommendation to be submitted to the President and it would be the President who will ultimately decide. In fact, in the last address to the nation of the President, that is exactly what I said, because of serious differences between two departments of government, ultimately, it will have to be the President to decide. But I'd like to underscore that the decision and the recommendation of the IATF is based on science. We heard Dr. Dans, as well as former Health Secretary Manuel Dayrit, and we have Dr. Dans was speaking on behalf of the Philippine College of Physicians and they were the ones saying that we should not reduce the one-meter social distancing.

Dr. Manuel Dayrit on the other hand said, the studies have shown that it is the wearing of mask and sanitation, as well as prohibiting talking and the use of cellphones, that will be determinative whether or not people can be infected in public transportation and not social distancing. So, I would like to underscore that the recommendation was arrived at that after six hours of long discussions. And take note, it was not as if it was the first time that the IATF considered the matter. It was previously approved in a meeting last Thursday, but despite that it took us another six hours to discuss and with the assistance of resource persons, all of whom are respected doctors.

I would like to underscore that Dr. Manuel Dayrit was not alone in arguing that it is the wearing of mask and other, what he referred to as the seven commandments, that could determine the spread of coronavirus in public transportation and not in social distancing, was joined in his opinion also by former Secretary Cabral as well as other medical luminaries including Dra. Minguita Padilla.

WEBB: I see. So, Secretary Roque, when will this be presented to the President and when can we expect a decision from the President?

SEC. ROQUE: I think the President will decide not later than tomorrow.

WEBB: But while the President is still going to decide on this, does the reduced physical distancing ... is it pushing through or is it suspended?

SEC. ROQUE: I think so, because it was previously approved in the last IATF meeting last Thursday. So, until the President revokes it, I think it will be implemented.

WEBB: I know that you have said that during the President's address the other night, sabi mo nga, I heard you are chime in, Secretary Roque, dahil nga napag-usapan ito, because even during that address, Secretary Galvez spoke, Secretary Duque spoke and then even Secretary Año as well and you also. Sabi mo nga, the press, the Malacañang Press Corps was asking you about this. But why would there be such a recommendation and approved by the IATF when there were apprehensions to begin with? Why not—was it just put on hold before you actually implement such a move or policy?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, that is one thing I'd like to clarify. When the IATF approved it, there was no objection, there was no controversy. The controversy came out again when medical groups, after the decision was made, made an issue out of it. But you know, just for the information of people, the President brought it up because of the letter of the Philippine College of Physician. So, I asked former Secretary Manuel Dayrit, what is the procedure in medical organizations – a letter signed by the president effectively, a decision of all of its members?

And former Health Secretary Dayrit said, no, there has to be resolutions that it's going to be an opinion of the members and the letters submitted by the president of the Philippine College of Physicians, according to Dr. Dayrit was only the opinion of its president because there was no resolution attached through it. And that is to give perspective to members of the IATF on how to weigh the conflicting expert opinion being given by physicians. So, it really has to be emphasized. The recommendation of the IATF based on science, was based also on doctor's advice particularly, although they have different separate opinions.

WEBB: Yeah, but it still caused confusion, Secretary Roque. BEcause even if that was approved Thursday of last week, the DOH I remember, sir, was already saying, in spite of this, we still ask the public kung puwedeng doon pa rin kayo, doon sa one-meter distance at hindi doon sa .75. Again, the question is, why wasn't this ...?

SEC. ROQUE: No, the DOH statement never said that. They emphasize only the importance of observance of minimum health standards. I had to ensure that of course the DOH will not issue a conflicting press statement and I have a copy of that statement issued by Secretary Duque, there was no such thing 'no. What she said was DOH was still insisting on minimum health standard, there was no mention of one meter in that statement.

WEBB: DOH on this resolution, I did read this, sir, and I do remember that you are right at some point, they said that the best of course is to practice safety protocols. But mayroon pong part doon, I remember, I'm going to go back to it, sir, noong sinabing kung kaya doon

sa one-meter distance ay mas mabuti pa rin iyon. So, be that as it may, Secretary, how was that meeting? It took six hours for the IATF to actually come up with a recommendation for the President. Ganoon po ba katindi iyong naging arguments that it took that long?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, alam mo, I'm going to be candid. I started the line of questioning 'no, and I address my concerns to Dr. Dans, kasi Dr. Dans is also part of the same group that called for the time out 'no. So, ang tanong ko na lang talaga, will the IATF's opinions really matter because it appears that Dr. Dans' group whenever they speak, they speak to the public na and they seem to be giving opinions na talagang government is making the wrong decision. So, I wanted to be sure that they were not wasting time kasi if they were always going to insist on their position, regardless of other considerations, we might just as well accept the position of Dr. Dans' group as gospel truth.

Because I was not willing to waste time on it. But Dr. Dans, in fairness, said that they of course, they have recommendations, but they will vow to the policy of government. They know that it's going to be difficult decisions, they know that there's going to other considerations that will have to be considered. And that's when I said, okay fine, let's ... I will personally contribute to their discussion given the assurance given by Dr. Dans 'no. But you see, when we make decisions, government considers all aspects. Health is very important, but there is also the issue of livelihood.

Marami ngang nagsasabi, we could probably survive the coronavirus; paano naman kung mamamatay dahil sa kagutuman. Transportation is very sensitive because although we want to open the economy, we cannot open the economy unless people can get to their work. How are we going to expect workers to go to their places of employment if there is not enough public transportation?

That's the essence of the debate. It's not as if one side wants to expose the population to the disease intentionally just for the sake of economy. Because the reality is, even if you survived the disease, if you can't survive because you are in poverty, that would not really lead to any positive results. So it's a very difficult decision, it was a very difficult recommendation. I think the President know it's not an easy decision.

But I'd like to assure everyone over and over again, the doctors were consulted; and not all doctors share the view that it is only one-meter distancing that is the solution. There are very respective doctors including two former secretaries of health saying we could achieve containment of the disease by wearing mask, shield, disinfecting the public transportation and more importantly, prohibiting talking, prohibiting the use of cellphones because unless you open your mouth, there will be no droplets to speak of.

WEBB: And listening to all sides, Secretary Roque, I know this is going to be the decision of the President, what was your stand? Saan po kayo napunta in terms of evaluating the different opinions of the health experts, kayo po personally?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, ako personally, si Dr. Manolet Dayrit kasi cited an international journal study that it is actually ... the spread of the disease is if you actually don't wear masks; at what prevent the spread of the disease is the mask and the additional protection of the shield which could further be reduced the probability of acquiring the disease if you don't speak because there will be no opportunity for droplets to come out of your body.

So to me, that sounds acceptable given the fact that we need to provide public transportation so that people can get to their work --- but that is my personal opinion. I repeat, that was personal opinion. The IATF came up with the recommendation and that will be submitted to the President. It is the President who will decide.

I think, iyon nga po, the other side naman, everyone knows the other side. I only had to explain my personal opinion because the physicians have already ventilated their view that we cannot compromise on the one-meter social distancing as part of the minimum health standards which is also the position of the Department of Health. So I presented both sides I think fairly.

WEBB: All right. So there is still a lot to talk about, Secretary. I'm just going to bring this, the statement of the Department of Health, "Further we ask all Filipinos to continue to practice all elements of wearing masks, etc." Let me just get back to you, let's get back to this, let's take a very quick break, Secretary Roque. We'll be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WEBB: Welcome back to The Source, I'm Pinky Webb. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Sec., I'll just bring this in, ano po, iyong statement ng Department of Health. Let me read this, this what I was referring to, "Given the recent decision of the DOTr to optimize physical distancing in transportation and in the interest of public health, we enjoin all Filipinos to be extra-vigilant in situations where distancing cannot be practiced." And this is what I was saying, sir, "And if possible, choose to participate in activities or use transport options that can afford at least one-meter distancing."

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, there is nothing there that says that we should not consider less than one meter. The wording was very, very particular, "if possible" which is the same language that the WHO. The WHO did not [unclear] say, you must never reduce one meter - if possible, reduce by one meter or at least provide [unclear]

WEBB: Right, that's why it said that can afford at least a one-meter distancing. All right, COVID-19, Secretary Roque, there was a press conference yesterday and, basically, you grade the country's response at 85%. And obviously, 85% would mean we are doing, the country is doing a good job on this.

And in many instances, Secretary Roque, we always talk about testing. We have tested, I believe yesterday you said, over three million tests conducted.

SEC. ROQUE: Over three million already, the highest in Southeast Asia – better than Korea; better than Japan.

WEBB: Yeah. So I guess this begs the next question, Secretary, but we have a total of 270,000 cases; we have the highest number in Southeast Asia. So how can we have a grade or how can you grade us 85% given this number, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, of course, it's a pandemic. The disease will continue to spread until we find a vaccine or antidote. But what's important is you look at the deaths. Why are we scared of pandemics? Because we could die of it. But how many are dying? It's 1.7%.

So what this is showing is that we know how to take care of those who get sick. We're also avoiding, to a large extent, the further spread of the disease. I keep on emphasizing that the fact that the UP group has been very accurate in predicting the numbers. And in the beginning, they predicted three million by June which did not happen. And the fact that we have incredibly increased our testing capacity from one, we now have in excess of—I don't know what it is now—in excess of a hundred definitely testing capacity 'no. And we have now exceeded our target of three million tests, and it's early in the game still 'no because we're building even more labs.

So I think, in relation to the whole world, you know we're number 21, number 22, considering that we're not as wealthy as the United States and the rest of the Europe, we have far less cases and far less deaths. I emphasize, kaya tayo natatakot sa pandemya ay baka ikamatay. Pero ang mga namamatay po sa atin ay 1.7%. Well, nalulungkot po ako na may namamatay pa rin, one death is more than enough. But compare this with the wealthier, more advanced nations which have higher mortality rates that the Philippines.

So given the limitations of our health system, I think we've done very good. We used the opportunity when we declared ECQ to improve our health capacity. And of course, now, we've realized that we need to build 50,000 more bed capacity to achieve the minimum standards imposed by the WHO. But we have rushed things, we have built further isolation units; we have inaugurated new COVID beds in East Avenue Medical Center and opening new ones all over the place, I think we've done a very good job given the limited resources that we have and given the fact that no one really in the whole world expected this kind of pandemic.

WEBB: But at 85% there are problems, sir, number one, this fact remains, we have the longest lockdown; and number two, we have a problem on contact tracing. Very recently, the President signed the Bayanihan II where a portion of that will actually go to the hiring of contact tracers because are definitely below far doon po sa contact tracing. So saan po napunta iyong the 15% that 85% we're doing a good job, 15% we're not? Ano po iyong 15% para po sa inyo?

SEC. ROQUE: Precisely, tracing. It's only now that we're actually going to use Safety.ph as a tool, as an automated tool to help us in tracing. It's only now that we're implementing the General Magalong Formula that tracing should go beyond the immediate members of the

family and should include 37 close contacts which we are now implementing [unclear], it's not absolute rule 'no because [unclear] and the circumstance of the person, maybe it cannot be achieved the 37 tracing.

And it's only now that we have utilized even public schools as isolation units, knowing that we really need to resort to facility quarantine, because even the asymptomatic, who do not have their own bedrooms and bathrooms may still spread the disease even if they stay home particularly amongst their family members.

So, I can't give a hundred percent because we are not perfect. We need to tremendously improve our tracing capacity, and thanks to General Magalong, I think we are headed towards the right direction. And of course, we need to build more isolation facilities to ensure that everyone who is asymptomatic can be accommodated in the isolation facilities.

WEBB: But to some, Secretary Roque, 85% might be a bit too high because when you look at even ... let's compare ourselves to the countries in Southeast Asia, we are the number one, the highest COVID-19 cases in South East Asia. And number two, when you look at all the articles online, it never says ... you will never find the Philippines being set as a role model in addressing COVID-19 whereas you have Korea—well, iba po iyon. But you have Thailand and possibly even Malaysia. When I look at the numbers of Thailand and Malaysia recently, sir, they were averaging about zero to 10 cases per day, and then we are still averaging about 3,000 to 4,000 this past week, Secretary Roque?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, let me correct you. The New York Times cited the Philippines as having succeeded in lowering the numbers and keeping the numbers low – that's the New York Times. And we were, in fact, clustered together with countries like Korea already 'no in that classification. So, the problem with the Philippine media, of course, is they always echo the voice of the opposition, which is fine, because this is a democracy. But that is why it is very important when you have a publication like the New York Times grouping us together with countries like Korea and Vietnam. It's important that we appreciate the efforts of this government.

Isipin na lang po natin, marami nang namatay, pero mas marami pa pong dapat namatay; iyong ikinatatakot natin na sangkatutak ang mamamatay dahil sa pandemya, hindi po nangyari dahil tayo po iyong kauna-unahang nag-lockdown. At dahil nga po diyan ay nagkaroon tayo ng pagkakataon na i-improve o pagbutihin iyong ating kakayahan na magbigay ng medical na attention sa mga magkakasakit na nangyayari po ngayon. And the further good news is as I speak, we're no longer at high risk as far as critical care capacity is concerned. We are at 50 to 60% capacity because we have built more ICU beds, we have built more ICU wards and more bed allocations have been given to COVID patients.

WEBB: Secretary Roque, we need to take a very short break, we will be right back.
[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WEBB: Secretary Roque, I need a quick reaction from you, regarding this. The Vice President was interviewed by GMA yesterday, I believe. And when asked about why she wasn't calling for the resignation, I believe, of Secretary Duque, she answered this: "Our problem is much bigger than Secretary Duque. For me, the problem really is with the national government appearing to have no system in place". Sabi pa po niya, "For me, the system is what fails, not only Secretary Duque". Your quick reaction, please, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: She is entitled to her opinion. Of course, as the leader of the opposition, we don't expect anything positive about this administration from her. We have accepted that, I think people have accepted that. She can say all the negative things about the administration, but people still support the President.

WEBB: Okay, I need to move on to the Ombudsman. There was a revised guideline on the release of SALN and I know, Secretary, this has been asked from you yesterday and even during your last press conference. Ang sabi po is that there are now reasons or justifications before one can secure a SALN of the President. But the Ombudsman has revised this and said kailangang authorized representative/individual, upon order of the court, the Ombudsman field investigation looking for this for fact finding and an authorization from the person. My question, Secretary, is: Does this not contradict with the President's stand on transparency and even his executive order on the freedom of information?

SEC. ROQUE: Anyone can request the copy of the SALN complying with the requirements of Executive Order # 1.

WEBB: The Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism, sir, has been requesting for the SALN apparently of the President, his 2018 SALN, since 2019. And they repeated the request before the Office of the Executive Secretary and the Ombudsman, they have not been given a copy of this, sir. So, there is a request, pero hindi po nabibigay.

SEC. ROQUE: I can't comment on that because I don't know what procedure they followed, because there is also a procedure provided in EO # 1 and you need to comply with it regardless of who you are as a requesting party. So, just ensure that you comply with the requirements.

WEBB: What kind of, siguro, signal does this send, Secretary Roque, knowing that, you know, the President is supposed to be calling for transparency, signing executive order on the freedom of information and yet you have people asking for his SALN and this is not being released.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, Pinky, I can't answer a question with a wrong premise. The premise there is that he is concealing his SALN - he is not! There is a mechanism to be followed – follow the mechanism. If that does fail, then pursue further avenues under existing laws. The case of Chavez says that the remedy is, file a writ of mandamus if you must, but you need to exercise your rights. If you think your rights are being violated and if that right is freedom of

information then do as you must. But I can't actually consider the President is concealing anything because, as far as I know, he has filed his SALN and it's been reported upon.

WEBB: Okay, we have run out of time. Thank you to you, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque.

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you very much, Pinky. Good morning to everyone.

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