

**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:** Catanduanes, Secretary, and Albay are said to be the worst-hit areas due to Typhoon Rolly. Okay, the President conducted an aerial inspection and he went to ... he landed in Guinobatan, Albay. Can you just give us more information on what the President saw and what he said or even what he told the residents there?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, he saw for himself the extent of devastation ‘no, and that’s why the standing order of the President to all departments and agencies of government is to take all steps necessary to help the typhoon-struck provinces to recover and rise anew. So that is why immediately after the aerial inspection and his trip to Guinobatan, there was also another meeting with all Cabinet members concerned, not only for the Cabinet Secretaries to report the extent of devastation but more importantly to report the government’s response to the devastation.

And the President so far has been satisfied in so far as typhoon preparedness was concerned. We were able to limit the casualties, and it could have more because this was a super typhoon. But he’s pleased to note that the local government units acted promptly in asking residents in low-lying areas to evacuate and thereby reducing, minimizing the number of casualties.

The task now is to rebuild and we’re focused now on, number one—well, you know, Catanduanes is completely isolated so the President has ordered the national—well, the Department of Energy and the Local Water... LWUA ‘no to do all that is necessary to reconnect the telecommunications of Catanduanes, as well as to repair the waterworks system because we know that without water, the province might be prone to other dangers, health dangers in particular.

Yesterday, there were already C-130 flights that brought in water supplies to Catanduanes, as well as food ‘no. And I know also that the NDRRMC also sent food and water by land already to both Albay and Catanduanes. So relief has been provided by the local government to all these typhoon-ravaged areas. And the advice of the Department of Budget and Management is for local government units that have used up their calamity funds, they can tap the quick response fund of national agencies which have them, including the OCD, DPWH, DepEd, DSWD and other agencies.

**WEBB:** The issue of Catanduanes, I know that you obviously, certainly know this that even on Twitter that was trending *#NasaanAngCatanduanes* because many of the netizens were asking

bakit walang balita sa Catanduanes. I just want to find, is the President planning to go there too?

**SEC. ROQUE:** It's difficult for the President to travel at the time of COVID 'no. But I'm a personal friend of Governor Joseph Cua and that's why we made sure that we, at least, resume or connected Catanduanes somehow by VSAT 'no, and we were able to contact him Monday. Well, OCD sent a team of personnel with satellite phone and VSAT facilities and that's why we were able to connect with Governor Cua. And the C-130 that I mentioned left yesterday for Catanduanes, and I'm sure there are more C-130 flights 'no.

So we are giving priority to Catanduanes because it is isolated as an island, they have no electricity; they have no telecoms; they have no water. But in due course, I think we will be able to partially restore telecoms. Smart and Globe have committed to government that they will do what is necessary to reconnect the island at least for communication purposes. I think Smart may have an opportunity because they will install a microwave that will restore, if not totally at least partially, the service of Smart in Catanduanes.

**WEBB:** So also, with regard to Catanduanes, the reports are, it's about 80 to 90% of the infrastructure is actually damaged over there and about 10,000 small houses were also destroyed. What would be the immediate plan of government for Catanduanes and its residents? Okay, I understand, I heard you yesterday also, sir, there's a C-130 on its way yesterday and a number of others bringing in food and water. But more than that, more than the food and water needs, what about the houses and the infrastructure?

**SEC. ROQUE:** For now, Governor Cua requested for TUPAD 'no, cash for work because he has to clean up the blocked roads so that they can deliver relief goods to everyone in Catanduanes. And I'm happy to report that yesterday, while we were having our live press briefing, we were able to contact Secretary Bello and he committed to give cash TUPAD to 5,000 citizens so they can begin the process of cleaning up and enabling relief goods to be distributed throughout the island. So that's the number priority – clean up the roads so that we can deliver the relief goods that are needed by the people.

And then, of course, it's very important to restore water because we can live without power but we cannot live without water, and while there is no water 'no, to ensure that water is airlifted and supplied by sea. As of yesterday, they could not even use the port in Catanduanes because there's a sunken RoRo there 'no. But I understand from Secretary Tugade that they have successfully removed or in the process of removing that sunken vessel. And he has told me that he already has a RoRo preparing to sail, and that is why I have also asked donors to provide rice and more water so that we could load it in the RoRo because there's only so much water that you can load in a C-130.

So if somehow this will get to Governor Cua, parating na rin po ang RoRo. So nagkaroon na po ng paraan para makadaong ang RoRo diyan sa inyo sa Catanduanes, meaning, there will be more relief goods on its way, in addition to those being brought in by air.

**WEBB:** So let's talk about what happened in Guinobatan. What I wanted to find out, sir, is that when we spoke to a resident there, ang sabi po sa amin is that that area, somewhere in ... I think it is ... I believe it's San Francisco, if I'm not mistaken, sir. Yeah, in Albay, sa Guinobatan, Albay kung saan po nagragasa iyong lahar and iyon pong mga malalaking bato. Ang sabi ho kasi sa amin is that they didn't think that iyong area na iyon iyong tatamaan. Okay, so tumaan po doon, but the problem is this: Quarrying operations, as we found out, continues around Mt. Mayon. So I just want to ask you, is quarrying really a good idea around an active volcano?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, you know, I'm not technical person but for my layman's point of view, it may have its utilities because remember, after a volcano explodes, there will be lahar deposit. And unless you get rid of the lahar deposit, it will eventually come down.

So I think that's the rational why they allowed quarrying because, number one, there's lahar; and number two, you need to remove the lahar. I know for a fact that the Governor of Albay has requested from NDRRMC funding precisely to deal with the deposited lahar in the volcano because eventually it will come down.

But we have partially, I believe last week, there was 833 million pesos released for Albay for the purpose of somehow dealing with the deposited lahar. But that's why there are ongoing quarrying activities there because we also need to remove those deposits aside from the fact that it is of course of livelihood. But having said that, I think the complaint gathered by the President was, in the process of quarrying they actually were gathering lahar deposits and they were mountains of basically soil deposits that were intended to be hold out of the area. But when the typhoon struck, they were there so making the lahar flow even worse than it could have been.

But I know that the President has instructed Secretary Cimatú to investigate right away. And on the same day that the order was issued, Secretary Cimatú immediately conducted his people on the ground. Of course, there are no activities ongoing right now because it is after the typhoon, but I think they're now investigating whether or not these lahar activities must continue.

But for the point of view of practicality, you need to remove the lahar deposits around the volcano; and number two, of course, livelihood for the people of Albay.

**WEBB:** Let's go to CamSur, Sec. Roque. Intense flooding also in Camarines Sur, now under a state of calamity. Si Congressman LRay Villafuerte was actually proposing the creation of a task force that would lead the rehabilitation efforts in the Bicol Region and I believe also in CALABARZON. Do you think the President would be inclined to do this?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, if you noticed, a task force perhaps is unnecessary because the style of the President is in case of disasters 'no, he relies on the people on the ground right now. And right now we have DPWH having prepositioned equipment already for precisely post-typhoon

rehabilitation efforts. Although, Camarines Norte and Albay are also equally hard-hit like Catanduanes, they are not actually isolated because the roads are now passable. There are about five roads still in that region which are impassable and that's the priority of DPWH. But as soon as all the roads are passable, then the rehabilitation process would of course be immediately underway in Camarines Sur and in the rest of Albay.

So what we're saying is, number one, government was prepared for this. We have prepositioned even equipment for DPWH, and food packs. And number two, the President is on top of the rehabilitation effort. A task force may not be necessary because the President is personally attending to ensure that the rehabilitation of these devastated areas will proceed as soon as possible.

**WEBB:** There was a Senate hearing yesterday on this alleged red tagging, and I do remember Senator Risa Hontiveros also proposing another thing on this. She said that maybe a portion of the budget of the National Task Force sa NTF-ELCAC for barangay Development, a portion of that can actually be tapped to use for rehabilitation efforts. Do you think that might also be a good idea to add funds to the areas devastated by the typhoon?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think that is the objective of ELCAC. The objective of the ELCAC is to promote development in areas with ongoing insurgencies because we know that poverty is the root cause of insurgency. So, I don't think there is any inconsistency with the proposal to actually spend funds in the typhoon damaged areas because, it's I think, a fact that Bicol also is a hot bed for insurgency 'no, so that would be within the mandate of ELCAC.

**WEBB:** All right. We need to take a very short break. The President's SALN, we're going to talk about that, the appointment of Secretary Carlito Galvez as Vaccine Czar and other topics. This is The Source of CNN Philippines, please stay tune.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**WEBB:** Secretary Roque, I was looking at the numbers, the COVID numbers, and it seems according to the Department of Health were actually seen better or improved numbers, why? Because four weeks ago, we were averaging about 2,500 cases and about two weeks ago, this went down to about 1,890. So that is about 25% dropped. So, the question is, why, to what do we attribute this improved numbers or did the numbers improved because the Red Cross halted their testing for PhilHealth funded testing?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I'm sure somehow the acts or the action of PRC in stopping their testing, somehow contributed, because less testing of course means less numbers. But I think by and large, people have been compliant with minimum health standards and of course, we have the President no less endorsing in a commercial that people should wear mask, should wash hands and should observe social distancing. I think people know by now, what to do to prevent the further spread of the disease and they have been cooperating. Our slogan right now is "Ingat-buhay, Para sa Hanapbuhay". And I think people know that they need to

observe minimum health standards so that they can go back to work and earn their livelihoods.

**WEBB:** Absolutely! Okay, but I guess, we need to look at the next week numbers, Secretary Roque, because last Monday, I believe, we were back at 2,300. So, what I am trying to analyze is that the last two weeks where the numbers went down could have been superficial, because of the halting of the testing of Red Cross. We have discussed this over and over again, Secretary. Was it supposed to be an executive order on a price cap on the RT-PCR? What's the latest on that?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's awaiting the signature of the President and, you know, together with the SALN, all these we'll have to set it aside right now because the task right now is to help the typhoon-ravaged areas recover so I guess that's the status 'no.

The President is in Manila. He is focused on rehabilitation efforts. But right now, he wants to make sure that, number one, that the basic necessities be received by the victims of this typhoon and everything else are not considered as important as the rehabilitation effort right now.

**WEBB:** But the RT-PCR price cap is also quite important, sir. You definitely would agree with me, we were talking about that, I guess some month ago, dahil nga iyong iba sobrang taas po ng kanilang costing sa RT-PCR.

**SEC. ROQUE:** The way I look at it, kung masyadong mataas sila, people will simply not go there. And that is why I have been announcing that in Tala Leprosarium, in Philippine Children's Medical Center, in NKTi, in Lung Center and in Las Piñas Perpetual Help Hospital, you can have your PCR test for P1,750 up to P2,000. Then of course, you have PRC at P4,000 including the certificate. Other private labs also offer P3,500. So, I think it is an exception that we have labs charging as much as 20,000, because right now, with 122 PCR laboratories and 35 GeneXpert laboratories, I think people do have a choice on where to go. And that is why I have been announcing that in areas we donated machines, in labs we donated machines, you can get it as cheap as P1,750. And soon, I understand that the pilot study for pooled PCR testing has been concluded and soon we will have pooled testing, PCR, and that would further reduce the cost of PCR testing to about P750 to P1,000.

So, with or without the executive order, I think the market is pushing down the prices because of the increase number of laboratories and the fact that we have been publicizing where people can go for cheaper PCR tests.

**WEBB:** Right, but an executive order will definitely lower that price, sir. Matatakot na po iyong mga [laboratories] that asked for a high number, mas lalo na kung manggaling po iyon sa Presidente?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, of course, I do not dispute that would still be ideal. Pero iyong mga P20,000, naku! Who can afford P20,000 anyway for PCR test? So even without the price cap,

I think the P20,000 will only have the billionaires as clients and how many billionaires do we have anyway. Basta ulitin ko lang po, diyan po tayo sa Tala Leprosarium, Philippine Children's Medical Center, NKTi, Lung Center at Perpetual Help Hospital. All over the countries din po, mayroon ding mga donated machines and I will flash them again in my next press briefing and I will also circulate this to the media. So the media can help assist the people go to labs which charged only from P1,750 to P2,000 per PCR tests.

**WEBB:** Iyon ang dapat nating tangkilikin. Secretary, again, we need to take another short break. The Source will be right back.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**WEBB:** Secretary Roque, previously you said that you would talk to the President and ask him if he would actually allow the release of his SALN. I just want to know, have you brought it up with the President, and what did he say?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, the times that we have talked, it's about the typhoon. So, no, I haven't brought it up. But we have another meeting tomorrow and he will make another address to the nation on COVID and perhaps there, I will then bring up the matter. But there was no opportunity to do it when we last met, because it was all focused on Typhoon Rolly.

**WEBB:** But personally, do you think it's a good idea that his SALN be released?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think there is a conscious effort to conceal because he has complied with it. But he is just respecting the recent guidelines issued by the Ombudsman because, after all, the Ombudsman is the constitutional body tasked with promoting accountability on these public officers. So all he is saying is, let's respect the guidelines issued by the Ombudsman and let's comply with those guidelines.

**WEBB:** Okay. I need to talk about the VFA very quickly, I don't know if you can give us any update on this, sir. June 1, suspended the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement. This will end in six months that should be sometime in December. Where is the President's plan? Which direction is he planning to take regarding the Visiting Forces Agreement?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That has the option of being further extended by another six months. So my thinking is, perhaps the President will invoke the second six month time to finally abrogate the VFA. But anyway, what I am saying is, there is no immediate rush for the President to decide because the notification we sent to the Americans gives them at least one year leeway before it's abrogated.

**WEBB:** And, Secretary, the US elections, what any changes in our relationship in the event Mr. Trump is reelected or if Mr. Joe Biden wins?

**SEC. ROQUE:** You see the state department ensures continuity as far US foreign policy is concerned. So, we don't expect any major changes in the bilateral relations between the Philippines and the United States. Of course, there is an issue of personal relations. But I think given time the President can establish an equally warm personal relations with whoever wins this elections, if it is not President Trump. All the President needed really was a year or two and he was able to foster personal friendship with President Trump. And even of there is a new President, I am not saying that there will be, but in case there is a new President of the United States in the person of Senator Biden, I am confident that the President can also developed close personal friendship with Mr. Biden. May the best man win as of now.

**WEBB:** Secretary, just your personal take on this. Who do you think is going to win?

**SEC. ROQUE:** You know, even US media sources – CNN, Fox – are very cautious in making their forecast now 'no, so I think I will follow their lead and we will just allow the results to come in.

**WEBB:** Last question, just a confirmation. The President will address the nation, is this going to be tomorrow night or would this be tonight aired tomorrow morning?

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, we just had our PCR test today. So today is Wednesday, we are meeting with him tomorrow, Thursday, and it would be hopefully aired also on Thursday night.

**WEBB:** Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque. Sir, maraming salamat po sa inyong oras.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Thank you as well, good day to all of you.

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