

Duterte reacts to COVID-19 with military repression

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As of Sunday evening, 1,418 people in the Philippines had been officially recorded as infected with COVID-19, a number which includes 343 new cases reported that day. Of the confirmed cases, 71 people have died thus far. Twelve of them were doctors who contracted the virus while courageously caring for patients despite not having received adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

The 71 reported deaths are only those who have been officially tested for COVID-19. Given the very limited testing thus far, the actual death toll is almost certainly an order of magnitude larger.

The Philippine government did nothing to prepare for this catastrophe. In late February, when the global impact of the virus was clear, Duterte delivered an incoherent and vile public address in which he said that he would personally “slap the f..king idiot virus,” but declared that Filipinos would not get sick because they prayed regularly. No medical supplies were stockpiled; no facilities were readied.

On March 16, long after the catastrophe was apparent, Duterte abruptly announced that he was placing significant portions of the country under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). The response of the Duterte administration to the pandemic has been the deployment not of masks and tests and treatment, but heavily-armed military checkpoints, armored personnel carriers, and police state repression.

The entire island of Luzon, the largest and most populous region in the country, including the capital city of Manila, has now been placed on total lockdown until April 13. Over 50 million people have been confined to their homes under threat of arrest if they leave. Beyond Luzon, other provinces and regions have been placed under de facto martial law, on orders from governors and provincial officials.

One member of every household has been given a quarantine pass that authorizes them at certain limited hours to leave their home in search of groceries or medicine. Anyone found outside without a quarantine pass, or traveling to a job deemed essential, can be arrested on the spot.

Flights out of the country have effectively stopped and all

public transportation has been suspended. Nurses, grocery store workers, bank employees, pharmacy workers, many of whom live great distances from their workplace, are compelled to walk for hours to get to their employment each day.

Among the industries that have not closed is the multi-billion dollar Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. Call center workers, employed by international corporations, largely American, and who work the graveyard shift in order to answer US phone calls, are still on the job.

The immensity of the looming catastrophe in the Philippines cannot be overstated. The millions who live in the densely populated shantytowns of Greater Manila have not had a single moment of “social distance” in their lives.

According to the Ibon Foundation research center, approximately 14.4 million people on Luzon are “non-regular workers and informal laborers,” about three out of five employed persons. The majority of the workers in this informal economy lives on a day-to-day basis, in which one day’s income provides the next day’s consumption.

Lockdown for these millions of people means malnutrition and possibly starvation. Anyone desperate enough to venture out of their squalid quarters seeking food or work faces the armed might of the state.

Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra told the press: “The total lockdown in Luzon is in effect a 24-hour curfew. No one leaves the house, unless covered by the exceptions/exemptions.”

The implementation of this curfew has been brutal. The police have been given authority to arrest without warrant anyone deemed in violation of this curfew. As of Friday, 42,826 curfew violators had been arrested, over 10,000 in Manila alone. Every person arrested faces fines and a prison term.

The police have subjected the population to a reign of terror. Numerous instances of torture, humiliation and physical violence have been reported. The arrested have been crammed into dog cages, they have been made to sit in the debilitating heat of the noonday sun on basketball courts.

Many of the tortured are minors.

In Bulacan, just north of Manila, a man was shot dead by the police for allegedly evading a lockdown checkpoint on his motorbike on Wednesday.

As with everything else, there is a fundamental inequality in the enforcement of the quarantine. When Senator Koko Pimental was placed under quarantine in his mansion after having been in contact with an infected person, he disregarded the instructions and went out grocery shopping in the elite business district of Bonifacio Global City.

His test came back positive. Yet upon learning that he was infected, the senator left his home to visit his wife in the maternity ward, where she was having an ultrasound, and he wandered through the delivery room complex. As a result of Pimentel's actions, 22 nurses have been quarantined along with an undisclosed number of grocery store workers. No charges have been filed.

As public outcry mounted, Justice Secretary Guevarra—the man responsible for the 24-hour curfew—declared that the Department of Justice (DOJ) noted that “people are prone to commit mistakes,” and the DOJ would “temper the rigor of the law with human compassion.”

Most of the rich have been able to avoid this unpleasantness entirely. While there are no tests available for the population, the rich and politicians receive multiple tests, even when they are asymptomatic, with medical personnel coming to visit them in their homes.

Kris Aquino, television celebrity and daughter and sister of former presidents, took a private helicopter to the island of Boracay where she is said to be “sheltering in place” at the private beach resort of a friend.

Like their health and their immunity from prosecution, the profits of the wealthy are also guaranteed by the state. The country's Central Bank last week injected 300 billion pesos (\$US6 billion) into the financial system through quantitative easing measures to stabilize the Philippine stock market. The heads of several major banks told *BusinessWorld*, in a report published Sunday, that they expected a good deal more money to be forthcoming for the markets.

For the rest of the population, hospitals are turning highly symptomatic people away, untested, if they are deemed not to be priority cases, including because they are not elderly. Some of those turned away have now died.

The state has allocated all of its resources to military repression and shoring up the profit margins of the elite. Desperate to stabilize its collapsing infrastructure, the Department of Health (DOH) on March 27 issued a public appeal on Facebook for volunteer medical professionals to work at “frontline hospitals” to cope with the influx.

The DOH offered P500 a day (less than \$US10) in pay to any doctor or nurse if they would commit to work eight

hours a day for 14 consecutive days, which would be followed by a mandatory onsite quarantine of two weeks. The appeal was greeted with mass outrage at the conditions and abysmal pay the government offered for the defense of the public's health

The response of the entire ruling class to the growing mass anger is repression and the preparations for dictatorship. The legislature passed a bill by an overwhelming majority giving the president emergency powers with the outrageous name, the We Heal as One Act.

The emergency powers, which have been granted to the executive branch, include imprisoning for two months anyone accused of spreading “fake news” online and subjecting them to a fine ranging from 10,000 to 1 million pesos. The target of this repressive bill is the dissent which is percolating from every section of the working population.

On Friday, a 55-year old public-school teacher and her son were arrested without warrant in their home after she posted on Facebook that her town's mayor was stacking up relief goods in the town gymnasium and not distributing them. She wrote, “Many people will die of hunger ... I call on those who have nothing to eat to raid the Lanao Gym. The food packs meant for you are piled up there.”

She faces the charge of “inciting sedition,” which carries a prison sentence of up to six years. Her son was arrested for attempting to protect his mother from the police.

Thus far, only 2,686 people had been tested for COVID-19 in a nation of over 100 million. The true number of those infected is doubtless far greater than that officially documented. Nothing has been prepared to treat or to care for the ill, but measures are in place to keep them in their shanty towns at gunpoint.



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