Reopening in the Philippines causes coronavirus surge

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The Filipino government is rapidly lifting lockdown measures, even as the spread of the coronavirus across the country has entered a dangerous new stage. Last week, the Philippines registered the fastest increase in new infections in the Western Pacific region over the previous fortnight, according to data from the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Between June 16 and June 27, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases rose by 8,143, placing it ahead of Singapore, China and twenty other countries in the region.

Over a two-week period, the country has seen more than 500 cases nearly every day. Last Tuesday tallied a record-high of 1,143 new cases. The total number of confirmed infections stands at 35,455, with 1,244 fatalities.

The spike in cases has mostly occurred in the two most populous metropolitan areas in the country: the capital Metro Manila and Cebu City. The Department of Foreign Affairs also reported a total of 8,433 cases and 538 deaths among the extensive population of migrant Filipino workers living outside of the country.

In a statement this week, the Department of Health defended the government's pandemic response, citing the Philippines' mortality rate of 3.5 percent as a positive outcome, compared with the global rate of 5.1 percent.

It claimed that "all agencies are tasked to closely monitor the rise in cases and strengthen our response through localized actions, especially in emerging hotspots." Such a statement serves merely as a cover for what has been an incompetent and indifferent response to the health crisis on every front.

In fact, the government department initially made an error in claiming the Philippines had a lower death rate than neighbouring countries. In an updated statement, it corrected itself by noting that Singapore recorded 4.4 deaths per million people, while the Philippines has 11.34. The high death toll compared with confirmed infections demonstrates that the spread of the virus is far greater than official figures indicate.

The Philippines' testing rate is ranked 136th in the world. With a population of 109.5 million people, it has conducted only 690,799 tests.

The recent uptick in Philippine cases coincides with the government's easing of lockdown measures and a limited increase in testing capacity, still limited to targeted swabbing. The government is far from reaching its target of 30,000 daily tests, with only an average of 12,000 to 14,000 conducted per day.

According to a study by University of Philippines health experts, the number of confirmed cases may reach 60,000 by July 31.

In an effort to begin reopening the economy early this month, the Duterte administration was scheduled to end all partial lockdown measures, known as the general community quarantine (GCQ) phase, on June 15. But confronted with pressure due to a precipitous rise in infection rates, the government was compelled to extend GCQ until June 30, after which a full-scale reopening will commence.

Metro Manila, as well as other major cities and populous rural areas throughout Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, has been under GCQ, a phase that allows public transportation, since June 1. The rest of the country has been downgraded to modified general community quarantine (MGCQ), under which public transportation may resume all operations, non-essential businesses can reopen at half capacity and large public gatherings are permitted.

On June 16, President Rodrigo Duterte returned Cebu City to the strictest level of lockdown procedure, or enhanced community quarantine (ECQ). Epidemiologists had correctly predicted that Cebu province, on the central Visayas Island, would become the new virus epicentre, due to the early relaxing of social restrictions. But the decision came too late, as the virus in Cebu City has emerged again with renewed force.

Economic concerns have been the key motivating factor behind the government's reckless and premature reopening. Presidential Spokesman Harry Roque earlier said there was a need to "balance" financial considerations with ensuring

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public safety. The government's actions, however, have made apparent its prioritisation of the profits of big business over the health of workers, who are being forced back on the job in the millions.

The Philippine central bank Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) has this week projected the country's GDP to contract between 5.7 and 6.7 percent, as a result of the pandemic's economic impact.

BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno expressed the thoughts of the entire Philippine corporate oligarchy when he announced worriedly: "The negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis is harsher than what was originally thought." Two more quarters of GDP contraction would potentially put the Philippine economy into recession.

Metro Manila and the whole island of Luzon, the virus epicentre, account for more than half of the country's population and generate over two-thirds of national GDP. Consequently, it has produced the overwhelming majority of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The latest surge, however, is most heavily concentrated in Cebu City.

Eduardo Año, vice-chairman of the coronavirus task force, remarked yesterday that Cebu's infection rate has now surpassed that of Metro Manila, a megacity spread out across 17 separate administrative units.

In keeping with the government's line of blaming new spikes on the population itself, Año addressed Cebu residents: "We'd also like to enjoin and ask the people to observe the health standards protocols. There are so many people violating the quarantine protocols, not wearing masks, not observing physical distancing. In fact, there was even a fiesta celebration the other day in Barangay Basak, San Nicolas."

This ignores the fact that government officials have consistently provided mixed messages through public announcements and mainstream media outlets, while also pushing to abandon any public health measures in line with corporate demands.

Cebu City hospitals, meanwhile, are severely understaffed and have even run out of beds for COVID-19 patients. Filipino Nurses United issued an appeal to the government on Sunday, calling for the mass hiring of medical workers in Cebu, with adequate salaries and benefits.

Filipino health workers have had to labour under gruelling conditions, facing the dangers of contracting the virus and fatigue from overwork. With no substantial economic aid from the government, and a continual lack of appropriate medical supplies and personal protection, they are unprepared to care for an ever-increasing influx of patients.

The health department on Sunday sent a miniscule contingent of just 32 medical workers to augment Cebu's healthcare capacity. But while its investment in healthcare has been virtually non-existent, the government is dramatically increasing its military presence wherever the virus is present.

Año explained that Cebu would experience a massive deployment of national military and police forces to "implement the strict observance of lockdown." Drones are also being deployed to survey the city.

As the past few months have illustrated, Duterte is utilising the pandemic crisis to enforce increasingly authoritarian police state measures, overseeing thousands of warrantless searches and arrests.

In a fascistic television address on April 16, Duterte threatened martial law, stating: "My orders to the police and military… 'If there is trouble and there's an occasion that they fight back and your lives are in danger, shoot them dead…' Is that understood? Dead. Instead of causing trouble, I will bury you."

His comments came hours after the arrests of around a dozen residents in a poor district of Manila for protesting about inadequate government food aid. The incident provoked mass outrage on social media, with the hashtag #OustDuterte trending on Twitter. On hearing about the popular anti-government sentiment, Duterte responded that only the military and the police could remove him from power.

The government finds itself confronted with opposition from a working-class population that is increasingly unemployed and starving, in the cities and countryside alike. Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles made the shocking announcement on Sunday that the hunger rate had nearly doubled in the previous six months.

According to a national survey in December 2019, around 8.8 percent of households, or roughly 2.1 million families, experienced involuntary hunger once in three months. The latest figures show this is now 16.7 percent.

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