

Stricter lockdown reimposed in Philippines as cases top 100,000

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The Philippines recorded a record 5,000 new COVID-19 cases over the weekend bringing the country's tally to more 100,000 cases according to the Department of Health. The Philippines now has the second highest number of cases in Southeast Asia, behind Indonesia. The Duterte administration responded on Sunday night by announcing a return to the strict lockdown conditions of modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ).

Two of Manila's largest government hospitals were forced to close last week because of the number of infected healthcare workers. Most hospitals report that they are beyond capacity and can no longer take any new patients, as they lack adequate facilities and beds. The Philippine Medical Association warned, in a letter issued over the weekend, that if urgent measures were not taken to curb the spread of the virus the entire medical system was on the verge of collapse.

The Duterte administration has responded to the pandemic with authoritarianism and anti-scientific nonsense, attempting to maintain control of the population and to resume the profit-making operations of banks and major businesses.

The Philippine government imposed one of the longest and harshest lockdowns in the world, which it enforced through draconian police measures. Over 76,000 people were arrested between March 17 and July 25 for violating curfew or lockdown. More than 900 complaints of torture and inhumane treatment have been filed with the Philippines' Commission on Human Rights.

The police converted Operation Tokhang, the warrantless door-to-door searches conducted as part of the war on drugs, into an alleged hunt for people with symptoms. The government called on the population to report their neighbors if they suspect they might have

symptoms. According to the *Washington Post*, the police have killed a number of "suspects" in their homes as a result of these warrantless searches.

While conducting door-to-door searches, imposing curfews, and carrying out mass arrests, the Duterte government has done next to nothing to detect, trace or isolate the disease. Confronted with a shortage of masks and hygiene supplies, Duterte told the public last week that they should clean their masks with gasoline. Medical professionals responded that if the public followed Duterte's instructions they would likely contract a respiratory disease.

The Philippine economy confronts its worst contraction in over three decades. Unemployment has reached record levels. The most recently available government data is for April and it reveals that 7.3 million adults were unemployed, a 17.7 percent unemployment rate, which is an all-time high.

An additional 13 million reported that they had jobs but were unable to report to work. The figures have only worsened since April. Extrapolating from the available data, it seems that over half the population has no immediate source of income.

Remittances from migrant workers are a mainstay of the Philippine economy and they have declined substantially as a result of the global crisis.

Confronting an immense loss of profits, banks and major corporations have clamored for workers to be sent back to their workplaces. On June 1, the government responded by placing the capital region under less stringent general community quarantine (GCQ) measures. The police repression continued and young people faced arrest for violating curfew, but the working population was expected to return to work. COVID-19 cases soared.

Of the new cases reported this weekend, 2,737 were

in Manila. More than half of all recorded cases, over 55,000, have been in the intensely crowded Metro Manila area. Thus far, the government has officially reported over 2,000 fatalities, but these numbers doubtless grossly underrepresent the actual figures.

The catastrophic figures are a result of the government's refusal to carry out mass testing combined with its back-to-work campaign of the past two months.

Confronting a soaring infection rate and the imminent collapse of the medical system, Duterte on Sunday night announced that he was reimposing the strict conditions of modified enhanced quarantine (MECQ) on the capital region of Metro Manila and its surrounding areas, scheduled to last from August 4 to 18. The general population will be confined to their homes and public transportation will again be shut down.

A majority of the population is struggling to secure their basic necessities. Mass outrage is mounting.

At midnight on Sunday night in a nationwide televised address, Duterte launched a tirade against health care workers who have publicly criticized the government response to the global pandemic. "Do not try to demean the government," he said.

The president repeatedly returned in his speech to the idea that workers were threatening revolution. He responded with veiled threats of dictatorship, declaring, "I will implement order, changing this government, without informing you. Would you be happy with that? So if you are really on a rampage, you want revolution, fine, let's start it, go ahead."



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