

# Duterte extends Philippines “state of calamity” as pandemic worsens

Owen Howell  
30 September 2020

Faced with a pandemic that is spreading out of control and a deepening economic crisis, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced last week that a “state of calamity” would be extended for an entire year.

Imposed in March, the six-month state of calamity recently expired. The extension, until September 2021, may be lifted or prolonged further as circumstances warrant, the president told a news conference.

The state of calamity allows national and local governments to draw emergency funds from anywhere in the country, in order to address the economic slowdown caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Officials are also able to control the prices of basic commodities like rice and cooking oil, the government proclamation explained.

Moreover, the measures permit a rapid mobilisation of police and military forces when summoned by the government. Duterte followed the declaration by ordering all law enforcement agencies to ensure “peace and order” in areas affected by the pandemic.

The Duterte administration first introduced emergency measures on March 17 when the number of infections was nearing 200, with around a dozen deaths. The figures have since soared to more than 307,000 confirmed cases and over 5,400 deaths. Due to extremely low testing rates and incorrect data, the real numbers are undoubtedly higher.

In an attempt to justify the extended emergency powers, Duterte claimed there had been “significant strides” in the pandemic response, BenarNews reported. However, “the number of COVID-19 positive cases and deaths continue to rise despite efforts and interventions to contain the same.”

The truth is that the health crisis has been grossly neglected in favour of implementing repressive police-

state measures and reopening businesses as quickly as possible.

Aside from the continued lack of testing and contact tracing across the archipelago, hospitals and other medical facilities remain grossly understaffed. There are approximately 65 doctors and nurses per 10,000 people in the Philippines. Hundreds of thousands of nursing graduates remain unemployed, despite the urgent need for new staff.

Health workers are underpaid, overworked, and often lack appropriate protection from the virus, leading some to describe themselves as “priso-nurses.” Thousands have appealed to the government to be allowed to travel abroad to earn a living, Reuters reported earlier this month.

The government said a partial lockdown would be enforced in the central city of Iloilo for two weeks due to infection spikes. Yet, the Boracay Island beach resort in a nearby region was planned to reopen to local tourists.

Efforts to revive the tourism industry, a key source of the country’s revenue, are drawing criticism. A newly constructed artificial beach in Manila Bay, designed to benefit nearby waterfront hotels, has come under fire from social media and public commentators. Many suggested the millions of pesos used to fund the project should have been invested in containing the pandemic.

On September 14, even as the country reached a record-high 259 coronavirus deaths in one day, the government decided to incrementally reduce the minimum physical distancing on public transport to just 30 cm. Epidemiologists pleaded with the government to reconsider its increased abandonment of restrictions. “This will be risky, reckless and counter-intuitive and will delay the flattening of the curve,” Anthony Leachon, ex-president of the Philippine College of

Physicians, told news channel ANC.

Duterte has utilised the pandemic to ramp up state repression, continuing to incite extrajudicial executions with impunity. These killings are carried out under the name of a “war on drugs” that has claimed an estimated 30,000 lives since Duterte’s election in 2016.

Duterte responded last week to critics of the extended state of calamity who accused his administration of not doing enough to address the public health crisis. “What ‘enough’ do you want?” he declared. “There are hospitals, beds and funeral parlours. Everything is there... The only thing that we can do, really, is to wear a mask, wear a face mask, and that’s it and wait for the vaccine.”

Duterte has staked his pandemic response on a vaccine being available by December and leaving the nation “better off” by January.

This is essentially an admission that no serious action to curb the spreading virus will be taken, as the government presses on with its economic reopening, with scant regard to the cost to lives. The extension of emergency measures comes as the extent of the pandemic’s economic and social impact is becoming clearer to the Filipino ruling elites.

Gross domestic product is expected to fall to its worst rate in at least 36 years, surpassing the 1984 debt crisis during the waning years of President Ferdinand Marcos’s dictatorship. The ASEAN +3 Macroeconomic and Research Office (AMRO) has projected that the economy, one of the fastest-growing in the region before the pandemic, will contract by as much as 7.6 percent this year, a sharp reversal from the almost 6 percent growth in 2019.

The shrinkage will be compounded by declining foreign remittances, a major prop for domestic consumption and local growth. Around 600,000 overseas workers had been repatriated as of mid-August, adding to the rising pool of unemployed. More than 10 million people so far have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Millions are reportedly threatened with starvation, with broad sections of the working poor in Manila forced to gather scraps of food on the streets. In a short film documenting the growth of poverty and social inequality, Channel News Asia spoke with an impoverished informal worker, Bernadette Sablaza, 64, who said: “We’re not afraid of COVID. We’re afraid

of dying from hunger.”

The intensifying anger within the working class and rural masses is fuelling a crisis within the political establishment. While his approval ratings plummet and his administration is discredited in the eyes of millions, Duterte is accusing Vice President Leni Robredo, leader of the opposition, of undermining his handling of the pandemic.

Robredo, who sits in Duterte’s cabinet but heads the Liberal Party, has begun to openly question the administration’s delayed economic stimulus packages and reliance on a future vaccine. She speaks for factions of the ruling class that demand further corporate restructuring and bailouts, and a closer alignment with the United States against China.

This establishment opposition to Duterte is backed by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). After assisting and supporting Duterte’s rise to power in 2015–2016, the CPP and its allied organisations are now trying to channel the hatred of workers and youth toward Duterte behind pro-US factions of the bourgeoisie, including the military.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**