

Philippines records first case of new COVID-19 strain

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An infection of the more transmissible British strain of the coronavirus was officially confirmed in the Philippines for the first time last Wednesday, threatening a more disastrous stage of the pandemic for the second-worst hit country in Southeast Asia. The Philippines joins at least 51 other countries and territories that have recorded a case of the variant, including Singapore, Hong Kong and China.

The infection was detected in a 27-year-old old real estate agent who had recently returned from a business trip to Dubai with his partner. On January 7, the couple returned on an Emirates flight and were placed in quarantine and swab tested. On January 8, the man tested positive for the original strain and contracted a cough. He was transferred to an isolation facility, where it was discovered through an X-Ray that he had developed pneumonia.

It was not until the results were sent to the Philippine Genome Centre (PGC) for full genomic sequencing that the new B.1.1.7 strain was confirmed on January 13.

Both residents of Quezon City had tested negative prior to leaving the Philippines and upon arrival in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is still unclear when and where the infection took place, given that the UAE is yet to detect its first case of the new strain.

The Philippine Department of Health acquired the flight manifesto pertaining to the patient and is now scrambling to contact those who were on board. Currently there is one flight passenger missing, a resident of Quezon City, who left incorrect contact details.

The UAE and Hungary have now been included on a travel ban of 33 countries, which was extended on Friday from the 15th to the 31st. Only Filipinos are able to arrive from the list of countries, but they must be placed in 14-day quarantine and tested. In addition, the

government announced it is now compulsory for travellers from all countries to be tested and to undergo genome sequencing to identify the new strains.

The emergence of new COVID-19 variants is the product of the profit-driven approach by capitalist governments worldwide. Under the banner of the “herd immunity” policy, they have allowed the virus to circulate, rejecting lockdown measures that would have an impact on corporate profit-making activities. This has created the conditions for variations and mutations to occur.

The fact that the variant arrived on a flight from a country that was omitted from the travel ban indicates its far-advanced spread and the inadequate character of attempts by governments in the Philippines and elsewhere to prevent its spread.

Studies have indicated that the UK variant has an increased infection rate of up to 70 percent. Whilst not more virulent, its increased transmissibility gives the virus the opportunity to spread at an exponential rate and overwhelm the capacity of hospitals and intensive care units.

Dr. John Wong, part of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF), warned earlier this month that the new strain could increase cases in the Philippines by fifteen-fold.

“With our current R [reproduction rate] of 1.1, 20,000 cases at the beginning of the month will be about 32,000 at the end of the month. But if the variant takes over, the 20,000 cases can become almost 300,000 cases by the end of the month,” Wong said.

Despite these warnings, the government has resisted calls for more stringent lockdown measures.

Health undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire reported on Friday that the government would not impose a “complete travel ban for everybody.” “We

want to balance health with the economy. It is not feasible for us to do that,” she said.

Health Secretary Francisco Duque III also ruled out any immediate escalation of the current general community quarantine (GCQ). He said any change to the policy would be dependent upon an increase in the weekly transmission rate and the capacity of the hospital system.

“As of now, we don’t have that kind of signal yet to elevate the current community quarantine [status],” Duque said at a news briefing last week.

“There is a possibility that more people would get sick because the new variant is more contagious. But if they would not be hospitalised because their cases are mild, it is possible that the quarantine restrictions won’t change,” Roque said.

In other words, the government is allowing the virus to circulate, to prevent any disruption to big business, and is openly acknowledging that this will result in ordinary people contracting COVID-19 and becoming ill.

Under the GCQ, businesses can operate at between 50 and 100 percent capacity, depending on their industry classification. Public transport is continuing to operate, at reduced rates, and potential centres of mass infection, such as shopping malls, remain open. Outside Metro Manila and four other hard-hit provinces, a “modified” GCQ is in place that involves even fewer restrictions.

This week, the Department of Labor and Employment acknowledged that some 20 percent of businesses it inspected, equating to almost 14,500, had been in breach of health and safety requirements, such as ensuring that workers could socially-distance. Officials ruled out any penalties for the transgressions, instead declaring that they would provide those businesses with greater “assistance.”

A post-holiday surge is also driving an increase in cases. The Octa Research Group recently noted that the reproduction number in Metro Manila had increased from 1.02 to 1.17. Health experts have previously cautioned against letting the virus rise above 1 until a vaccine becomes available.

“There is a clear upward trend now... and if this upward trend continues, the local governments will need to implement measures to reverse this direction before the pandemic gets out of hand,” the Octa team stated.

They also noted that the percentage of tests returning positive has risen above 11 percent in Metro Manila, indicating broader transmission that is not being tracked. The World Health Organisation warned early last year that a positivity rate above 5 percent indicates insufficient lockdown measures and contact tracing.

The rise in cases is particularly sharp in Davao City, on the island of Mindanao, where daily infections are greater than 100. In the Davao region more broadly, there is a continuing spread amongst health care workers. A total of 107 cases were recorded last week, mostly among nurses.

Government officials have stated that there is sufficient hospital capacity in most areas. The infections among medical staff, and the prospect of the spread of the new strain, pose the risk that the health system could be overwhelmed if there is a major surge.

The Philippines has been the second-worst-hit country in Southeast Asia. It passed half a million cumulative cases on Sunday, while the official death toll is approaching 10,000. When the pandemic struck, the right-wing administration of President Rodrigo Duterte dismissed the threat posed by the virus and rejected calls for elementary safety measures. Only amid mass infections and a crisis of the health system were lockdown measures introduced.

At the same time, Duterte has used the pandemic to boost the role of the military in public life, in line with a broader authoritarian agenda. This has gone hand in hand with an offensive against the social position of the working class and the poor. Hunger and malnutrition are at record highs and millions have been thrown out of work or pushed into poverty, with only a pittance of government assistance.



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